

DANCE IN THE
RIVER

JANET ERIKSSON

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Special thanks to Janie King for helping Janet type the narrative part of this e-book when she had a broken finger!

To learn more about Rick Bonfim Ministries and the Brazil Mission, visit <http://www.latterain.com/>.

The Rick Bonfim mission trip to Brazil isn't like most mission trips. As with other mission trips, you come to serve and give your all to God, letting Him shine His light and His love through you, to each person you meet. But it's also a place for you to receive ministry, to grow in the Spirit. It's a place of preparation for the ministry, whatever it may be, that God is calling you into in your daily life. And it's a place where God will have His way with you. He will consume you. He will change your life completely. If you let Him. If you surrender to His love.

Dance in the River is my testimony to the heart-shattering, life-giving work God did in me while I was in Brazil in February 2007. You'll read about our wonderful brothers and sisters at the mission and in the churches and neighborhoods we visited. You'll read about the way God moved in power through the churches, and the way Jesus touched individual lives all around us.

But this is also a personal story of the way I was courted, convicted and swept up in the River of love poured out by the Most Beautiful Lover that ever has lived and ever will live. The Lord Jesus Christ consumed my heart, with His fiery passion that human love cannot measure. He taught me how to dance in the River with Him. It was the beginning of billions of changes He's taken me through over the past year, hour by hour, to bring me to new life, to new ministry... to be the person He created me to be.

This isn't just my story. This is a personal telling of our Lord's eternal story for anyone who doesn't understand or believe how deeply you are treasured and loved by the King of kings, and by His eternal family. He created you to spend an eternity growing in love with Him; He created you to take your unique place in His heart and in His Kingdom – a place no one else can fill. *He loves you!*

If you let Him, He will show you what the world looks like through His eyes, with His heart burning in you. He will shatter and rebuild you with infinite love, in deeper ways every hour. He'll touch your spirit with His fire, and with His tender gentleness.

You'll discover that your wildest dreams, the ones you've hidden away in your heart because they seem impossible, are exactly what He has planned for your life, from the very beginning. You'll be blown away by the love in His eyes and the smile on His face when you take *your* seat at His family dinner table in the Kingdom.

You are not alone. You are treasured, just because you are *you*. You are so deeply loved. And you are invited to dance in the River.

*Janet Eriksson
March 2008*

Pre-Departure

It was a Friday evening in October and we were gathered for an Emmaus reunion service at the First United Methodist Church in Gainesville, Georgia. Sitting in a pew near the front of the chapel, I was multitasking: gazing at the wooden cross behind the altar, praying in the spirit, listening to a devotion... and questioning God on why He wanted me to clear my schedule the next day, to attend a program I knew nothing about.

A few days earlier, someone told me Rick Bonfim was doing an all-day program at our church, Dahlonega United Methodist Church, on Saturday. He said, "I'd like you to experience some of it." I was busy with my writing ministry and had conference calls scheduled, but I prayed and received a quick response: "Do it." I felt badly about canceling and shuffling calls, but when God insists, I don't say no.

As I sat there on Friday evening, gazing at the cross, I heard a deep voice: "Get ready!" God rarely speaks to me in a booming voice, but when He does, He means business... and He means now.

Get ready? What do You mean? Lord, I've been letting You turn my life inside out for the past year and a half. How much more ready do I need to be? Ready for what?

He didn't answer, and I didn't question further. I stood for Communion. As usual, I was overcome with thanksgiving for His incredible love, and for all He was doing in my life. He had carried me through a year of trial that followed decades of trauma. I had turned my life over to Him. He had blessed my writing ministry, given me a new home, a new start at life. Through one miracle after another, God had shown me how much He loved me and wanted to guide my every step.

If He wanted me to be ready for something, so be it.

Saturday came, and I learned who Rick Bonfim is. My friend said he wanted me to "experience" some of it. Anyone who's worked with Rick knows that "experience" is the right word! I had no idea that day was just the beginning of the life-changing *experience* God had prepared for me.

We sat in the carport at a church family home, through the freezing October morning and afternoon, warmed by the place heaters, the worship music and the presence of the Holy Spirit. I didn't know why I was there, or what God wanted me to get from it. But I couldn't stop absorbing everything Rick shared in his teaching on the book of Romans. I was a parched sponge; at the time, I didn't know why. My prayer life was strong; my ministry was Spirit-driven; I was submitted to the Lord; He had proven His love for me... and I had just come through the desert and felt like I'd entered the Promised Land. Why was I so starved for what Rick shared?

Toward the end of the day, Rick started ministering to us individually. He pointed at me: "Most people don't survive trauma." I shivered. I knew he was considered a prophet, but to hit it so exactly, when he knew nothing about me... I hadn't yet realized how much Rick depended on God for every word he shared. "You came through trauma and you're ready for your life to be restored. I know all of this is strange for you, but you haven't broken eye contact with me the whole time I've talked. When I started ministering, you could have gotten up and gone into the kitchen to avoid it, but you didn't. The reason is your absolute conviction." He said a few other things I don't remember and then, "You are feeling unfulfilled."

Whoa. Wait a minute. I was in the Promised Land, remember? The trauma and trial were behind me; God had worked miracles; my ministry was flourishing. How could Rick say I was feeling unfulfilled? I shook my head.

“Then tell me,” he said.

“I’m there.” I chopped at my hand for emphasis.

“You’re there?”

I nodded. “I’m there.” Another chop. “I’ve come through the desert. I’m in the Promised Land.”

“But...?”

His question pressed down on my shoulders. Why was I so thirsty for... *something*? With hands upturned, I said, “How do you move forward from a place of total joy?”

He didn’t hesitate. He pointed at me. “You need to go to Brazil.”

I still didn’t realize God was speaking to me through Rick, but the moment he said those words, my heart knew the truth. I nodded. He was right. God had spoken.

I was going to Brazil.

I didn’t realize how soon the trip would be. It was scheduled to start the last day of January, a little over three months away. Officially, the trip was already closed; the deadlines had passed. But when God opens a door...

At least I wouldn’t be going on this adventure alone. At the same gathering, God called two others from my church to go on the trip. While I hadn’t been at the church long and didn’t know many people, Lynn and Craig were among the first people I had met. I was glad I’d have their company on this journey.

“Don’t worry about the money,” Rick told us.

Over the previous few years, God had proven He would meet every financial need I had, in ways I never expected. I wasn’t overflowing with money, but the Lord paid every bill. I knew if He wanted me on this trip, He would make it happen.

Because time was short, we couldn't arrange a formal fundraiser. I didn't know many people at the church to give fundraising letters to. The trip was scheduled in the middle of a busy time for tourists, so airline seats were disappearing. I knew it would take at least two weeks for me to come up with enough money on my own to buy the ticket. I brought this need to two prayer teams: "Please ask God to hold a seat open for me if He wants me on this trip."

The passport and visa would be a particular challenge. I had just come through a divorce and my last name had changed, but none of my documents reflected that. My passport was expiring in six months, so it had to be renewed anyway. Might as well do the whole name change at once. The question was: Where *was* my passport? After moving twice in six months, I still hadn't unpacked. It could be anywhere.

I prayed: "Father, I know You can do all things. If You want me to leave the country, I need that passport. I need to know where it is."

God spoke gently: "Do you honestly think I won't show you?"

I was filled with His peace. An image formed in my mind, of hairbrushes. I walked into the bathroom, searched through a plastic bag that had some of my hair supplies. At the bottom was my passport. In that moment, I knew without a doubt God wanted me in Brazil.

By the beginning of December, my airline ticket was purchased, mostly with my own money. The balance of the money was due to the mission office. I didn't have it. I had raised some but not nearly enough. In another week or two, I could come up with a portion on my own. But I'd still be \$500 short.

I didn't yet understand the importance of inviting others to contribute to the mission trip fund; of letting them be blessed by participating; of leaving all of the funding in God's hands, not trying to do any of it on my own. Even though I was new to the church, and new to mission fundraising, I could have asked the Lord to lead me further out of my comfort zone; I could have asked for more help from others.

But those were lessons still to be learned, and God is a patient teacher. He had a whole lot more to teach me – in His perfect way, in His perfect time. He never condemns us as we try to learn. Instead, He blesses us for our willingness to learn His ways.

I had another dilemma to face – one that would increase the cost of the trip. It was my passport renewal and visa. My situation was so complicated, with the name change and all, that I needed an expediting service to handle it. I couldn't pay their fee, plus the passport renewal fees, plus what I owed to the mission office... I figured I'd pay what I could to the mission office and keep praying for the rest to come in. I'd still need another \$500, plus all the passport fees.

That evening, I went to church for choir practice. A friend came up to me, saying she wanted to contribute to the mission trip. She handed me a check. I thanked her and folded the check into my wallet without looking at the amount. I was thinking it was \$25, and so grateful for it; every dollar I didn't have to come up with myself was literally keeping food on the table. I got home that night and unfolded the check to make out the deposit slip, and I nearly fainted. It was for \$500. My trip was paid for.

I still needed the new passport and visa, and I would have no chance of paying for those on my own until the beginning of January. My plane ticket was already purchased, with a January 29 departure date. God is a God of the impossible, and He'd gotten me through some tough visa situations overseas before. He could do this, and I believed He would. After all, I hadn't opened the door to this trip; He had. Calmly, with conviction and with a lot of prayer cover, I told God I trusted Him and submitted everything to Him.

The first week of January, I fell into a deep sense of discouragement. I didn't know what triggered it; I just felt overwhelmed. I knew it came from the enemy – if God wanted me on this trip, the enemy clearly *didn't*. I'd been through many spiritual attacks, where my feelings weren't my own; where I felt like I was being emotionally beaten black and blue. I figured I'd ride this one out like all the rest.

But the feeling of despair kept getting worse. I realize now that God allowed it, because He wanted me to stop trying to ride everything out on my own. He wanted me to learn to come to Him quickly with my feelings; to rest in Him; to stop trying to take blows He'd already taken on the Cross.

That Sunday, I stayed home from church. I shouldn't have. I should have done whatever it took to get myself there – as I have done every time since then, no matter what I might be going through. I needed the worship, the corporate prayer, the fellowship; to be with people praying expectantly for the Holy Spirit to move in power. I needed help and encouragement. But that was another lesson to be learned, and that morning I felt paralyzed. I couldn't move from the couch, where I'd slept all night. I sat staring at the wall, unable to pray, unable to ask God for help.

By late afternoon, I was still sitting on the couch, going through the worst spiritual attack of my life. I'd encountered demons before, and darkness. But I'd never felt so surrounded by it.

You're right where you need to be, a hideous voice of darkness said. I watched as a black smoky form slithered around the coffee table. *Just relax. We'll take care of you. You know this is where you belong.*

An attack from the enemy usually had me pounding my fists and screaming, "Get out!" Not this time. Instead, I began to feel a deep sense of God's peace. It slowly filled me, and overflowed. I sat back calmly, and took a slow breath. The words came quietly: "Lord Jesus, I'm Your inheritance. Claim me. Now."

A flash of brightness exploded in my living room, and the blackness slithered away. I spent the rest of the evening collapsed on my prayer pillows, sobbing and thanking God. I knew the attack came because I was going on the mission trip, but I didn't know why specifically. I could have guessed – but every guess would have been wrong. The reason for the attack, as I would learn later, was beyond anything I could have imagined. It had nothing to do with the Brazil mission. It had everything to do with the dramatic changes God was about to bring to my life. Brazil just happened to be the starting place.

It was January 9. We had 20 days left until departure. After three hours of filling out documents and trying to gather legal papers, I overnighted my passport renewal and visa application to the expediting service. I prayed the whole time. The paperwork was so complicated, and I couldn't afford to have one thing be out of order.

The next day, I received a call from the expediting service. They had received my paperwork, and there was a problem. Brazilian visas were issued jurisdictionally. I still had my out-of-state driver's license. They told me I'd need to submit a new visa application and overnight it to the office for the state where I used to live.

I didn't have a car. Because of the divorce, I'd been without a car for eight months. That made every little errand an ordeal. Now I'd have to find someone to give me a ride to the place where I could overnight a package. I still didn't know that many people – I hadn't been in Dahlonge a year. I was getting so tired of asking the same few people from church for rides, over and over. They were always so wonderful about it, but I felt like I must have been an imposition every time. I wasn't used to depending on others.

I hung up the phone to mull things over. A few minutes later, the phone rang again.

“You have another problem and it's much more serious this time. Your passport is mutilated.¹ You'll have to start from scratch. Apply for a brand new passport. And you'll need an original copy of your birth certificate.”

I put my head in my hands.

It would have been so easy to quit.

Just say, “God, I can't do this.”

I was already stressed; my life was in upheaval, and things were changing so fast. My writing ministry was starting to go through a major transition, and I didn't quite understand where God was taking it. I still didn't feel settled in my new place. I had no car, no money, no time to sleep or even think; no chance to reflect on, much less recover from the trauma I had been through for years. And that sense of discouragement still lingered.

God wants me on this trip. He called me. He's already done the impossible... so many times.

What could I do? I had to press on.

¹ Years of Siberian train travel had worn it out. The edges of the photo page were peeling up. For security reasons, it could not be considered for renewal in that condition. Thus it was stamped, “Mutilated.”

I searched everywhere, but I couldn't find my birth certificate. I called my mom to see if she had a copy; just as I feared, she had given her only copy to me, years before. The passport agency told me where I could order an expedited copy of my birth certificate. It would take five to seven days. *Five to seven days?* My departure was in 20 days, and the birth certificate was just the first step. I still had to get the passport and visa!

“Dear God, I have to be faithful. I have to be. I'll do what You've asked, even though this looks impossible.”

I tried not to look at the calendar.

The birth certificate expediting agency needed a faxed copy of my driver's license or they wouldn't process my phone order. It took several tries to get the fax through, and there was no one to call for confirmation. The only way to know it was being processed, they told me, was to check my bank account and see if the fee was deducted.

On Friday evening, January 12, we had another Emmaus gathering at the same chapel in Gainesville – the place where God had said, “Get ready!” Lynn and Craig were at the gathering too; they were having just as much of a struggle as I was, trying to get everything done in time. When one of the Emmaus leaders asked for prayer requests, Lynn said, “Three of us are going on a mission trip to Brazil. We need your prayers.” She pointed at me: “Janet is having problems getting her passport and visa. We know it's a minor hiccup to God, but just pray for that situation.”

When I got home that night, I checked for confirmation that my birth certificate request was processed. *Praise God!* The money was deducted from my bank account; they'd received my request and it was in process. I couldn't help but look at the calendar then. Though the agency had said “five to seven days,” I sent an email to every intercessor I knew: “Step 1 out of 9 is done. Please pray that my birth certificate will be processed in 24 hours.”

On Sunday, I got a call from UPS with the tracking number for a Monday delivery. I fell to my knees. *Thank You, God.*

On Tuesday, January 16, with 13 days left to departure, I felt like I had never assembled so many documents in my life. If one thing went wrong... I had to ask someone to drive me to the courthouse, so I could have my new passport application and all supporting documents sealed. The clerk was awesome. She took more than an hour with me to be sure everything was done right. So many things could still go wrong. My only prayer was, "Father, You opened this door. I know You'll see it through." I wanted only His will.

"Have you looked at the calendar?" my mom said, when I told her everything was on its way to New York.

"Yes, I've looked. God isn't limited by the calendar. If He wants me in Brazil, I will be in Brazil."

I hadn't even begun to think about actually going to Brazil, or what God wanted me to do there, or why this trip was so pressing to Him. But I did know one thing: God made clear to me on that night back in October that this was His call. I could do nothing less than press on in total belief.

It wasn't easy. Discouragement was still draped across my shoulders. Every little thing seemed overwhelming. Through my writing ministry, I published an online Christian magazine. I was working almost 24/7 to get far enough ahead with the magazine that I could take two weeks off for the mission trip. And I still didn't know *if* I was going.

A friend took me to the store to buy clothes and supplies for the trip. It seemed strange to buy supplies when I didn't have my passport or visa yet, but if they came through, I'd have to be ready. I was so emotionally down that day, and irritable, with no explanation as to why I felt that way. As I dumped clothes on the conveyor belt at the checkout, I muttered, "I don't want to do this."

That afternoon, I went to God in prayer. "Abba, I don't understand why I feel like this. Why is this trip getting to me so much?"

He didn't answer directly. Instead, He nudged me to answer my own question.

"I'm scared." I nearly crumbled under the weight of it. "I'm truly scared. I'm terrified to go on this trip."

I tried to think of all the reasons that might cause me to feel this terrified... as if I could answer that question with my mind. God was so patient as I struggled to rationalize. I'd lived overseas before; things had been stressful there; I'd had a lot of close calls. Then there was the trauma I'd been through. Maybe I just wasn't ready for anything new.

"I know You want more for me, Abba. But I can't do this. I'm not ready."

Ready for what, I didn't know. Nor did I realize that my terror came not from the thought of going overseas again, or possibly being called into a new area of ministry, or moving forward with my life. It wasn't until much later that I learned the true source of my fear. It came from deep within my heart and spirit. From a part of me so hidden away that it was truly terrified of being uncovered and set free. It was a part of me that was afraid... *of God's deep love*. It would take almost another year before I'd fully understand that.

I sobbed for what seemed like hours, crying out to God in the spirit. He let me agonize, until I wore myself out. Then slowly, gently, He filled me with His peace. When it was over, I knew I was ready. And I knew that every detail of the trip was taken care of.

I was going to Brazil.

Through prayer, God told me I'd have my passport and visa on January 25, four days before departure. Three other intercessors heard the same from God. Despite the confirmations, when I received an email from the expediting service on January 24, confirming my documents had been shipped and would arrive the next day, I cried out in total amazement.

"You're *surprised?*" one of my friends said, after hearing about all the confirmations.

Acts 12:16 came to mind. Like Peter's friends, I was astonished at God's incredible answer to prayer.

The next day, I held my brand new passport and Brazilian visa in my hands. Everything was in order. That's when it hit me: *Wow. I'm going to Brazil!*

I had no idea what to expect. But I knew one thing: I was embarking on this mission trip to Brazil with *no doubt* that God wanted me there. I had never received such a blessing. Lynn and Craig were blessed too, as God took care of every last detail of their trip. That Sunday, our church gave a generous love offering to the Brazil mission trip. That's just the way God works – giving blessings in abundance, more than we can ask for or imagine. God let all three of us know, without a doubt: He wanted us in Brazil.

SWIMMING UPSTREAM

1

Story writers begin by asking, “When does the trouble start?” In the story of my mission trip to Brazil, the answer is easy. The trouble starts when God takes a self-assured world traveler and spiritual warrior, and drops her alone in the middle of a Brazilian mission with no food, no water, no knowledge of Portuguese, no money... with nothing but Him.

After a nine-hour overnight flight, we flew in over the mountains to land at Rio de Janeiro. The mountains were covered in a thick mist that seemed to cascade down like a waterfall in the sunrise. It was one of the most beautiful sights I had ever seen. I felt like we were coming into a fairytale kingdom. Before I left the States, I had asked God to show me everything He was doing in Brazil to build His Kingdom. I remembered how excited He seemed when He told me, “You’d better believe I will show you. I will show you *everything*.”

It was important to me that I do things differently on this trip than I’d done before. I had gone overseas many times. Always, I was prepared to teach, to instruct, to guide... as if I had all the answers. While I was coming to Brazil to serve, I knew I was also here to learn. I knew I had no answers this time. Only God did. What a relief!

For reasons no one seemed to know, I was arriving two days ahead of the mission team. Rick had arranged for Pastor Tony, the mission church pastor, to pick me up at the airport. Some might find it nerve-wracking to arrive in a foreign country by yourself, with no food or money, sleep-deprived, with the hope someone would meet you at the airport. I wasn't concerned, and that had little to do with my faith. I had traveled in foreign countries so much before, gotten into and out of so many predicaments that I took things one moment at a time. Nevertheless, I was glad to see Tony holding the sign with my name on it. One less thing to deal with!

We got into Tony's little car, left the airport and headed toward the city of Niteroi across the bay from Rio. As we crossed the long bridge, Tony showed me the place where he worked for 12 years before God called him to preach. He and his young family had given up everything and moved to the mission. Then he pointed across the bay to the mountains I had seen from the air. On the ground, things didn't look so majestic.

"Santa Barbara is in those hills," he said. I recognized the name of the area where the mission is located. "It's a very impoverished community. A lot of single mothers and children. They have a hard life. A lot of depression and addictions."

As we reached Niteroi, even though I was completely exhausted from the flight, I started to feel more alive than I had in years – 10 years to be exact, the last time I was overseas. There's something about being in another country that stirs all your senses. I didn't realize how much I had missed that. Scenes are brighter, smells are stronger, noises are more interesting. Though I was far away from where I now lived in Dahlonega, Georgia, it felt like I was coming home.

That's when I heard God whisper, "I want you to go to Africa and stay there for a while."

As I watched the blur of the Brazilian cityscape, I could almost see glimpses of another landscape across the Atlantic. For years, God had given me visions of Africa. I figured it would happen "some day," but why was He telling me now?

I said silently, *You brought me all the way to South America to tell me You want me to go to Africa?*

He said nothing more. But I understood: If God wanted me to pick up and "Go!" like Abraham, there was no better way to get my attention than by getting me out of the country.

We arrived at the mission. I was glad to see that it wasn't hidden away from the community it serves; it is right in the middle. We were greeted by several of the mission staff, all smiles and nods and warm handshakes. Not a word of English; and for the first time in my life I was in a place where I didn't speak the language. I'd studied 15 languages but Portuguese wasn't one of them. I was told I wouldn't need it; it would take me a long while to understand why.

One of the ladies, I'll call her Ana², led me inside and showed me my room. Somehow she communicated that I could rest and she would be back shortly with some food. It didn't take me long to realize this would be just about the only food they had there, and they were completely out of bottled water. I had half a bottle left from the Atlanta airport, along with a candy bar and half a package of crackers.

And I had almost no money – a little cash in my wallet, but that was all I would have to give as an offering to the local churches. That was God's money and I wasn't about to touch it without His permission. If He had told me to, I would have taken that money and found a way to get food. Instead God told me, "I want you to fast until the team gets here."

Alone for two days.

No food. No money. No language skills.

No resources, except my Bible and my prayers.

God had me right where He wanted me.

During those two days, I did a lot of journaling, Bible reading and praying. I had fasted before but not when I was doing intense study and writing. I didn't think it was possible to concentrate without food. Though I didn't realize it right away, God was beginning to teach me the power of spiritual nourishment and how to feed on His Holy Word.

² With the exception of the leaders, all names of mission staff have been changed to respect their privacy. The names of some mission team members have been changed too, for privacy.

Though I was always writing devotionals and Bible studies and encouraging others to read the Word of God, I rarely came to the “table” to eat. At most, I took a quick bite of His Word once a day and felt refreshed, then went on to do my work of encouraging others to read the Bible. I had no idea God wanted so much more for me. He said to me, “During this time in Brazil, you will get into My Word – deeply. You will come to understand exactly Who I Am.”

It was an amazing feeling to journal with God during those two days. I made a conscious effort to feel my surroundings in the way He wanted me to experience them. This was a big change for me. Normally, I would have been out walking around the community, talking to people, experiencing their lives through my human heart, fighting their battles through my mind, accessing things on my own terms and strength. But during those two days, the Holy Spirit did not lead me to leave the mission property, not even once.

Inside the mission gates was an outdoor area with steps terraced down a steep hillside. I sat out there each day to read my Bible and write in my notebook. I could see houses on the distant hills. I could hear sounds of life outside the mission. I stayed out there on the steps until late at night, sitting in the dark and talking to God.

I remember one night gazing out at a home on the hill across the town. I could see a small fire outside the little home; people were coming and going, something was cooking on the flames. I would have given anything to be in their company. I tried to imagine who they were, what they were saying, what they had experienced that day. I asked God, “How do You want me to pray for them?”

“Discouragement” was all He said.

I waited. Finally I said, “Lord, I need more.”

“Discouragement,” He repeated.

“I know they are discouraged, Lord, but how do You want me to pray for them?”

I heard nothing.

Tears came to my eyes as I watched the people. They were so far away that they were tiny shadows. Yet I felt like I was right there with them. Sitting off to the side, unable to do anything, not even to pray. Anger, frustration, helplessness began to well up in me. *Why doesn't He talk to me? I'm an intercessor. I'm here in Brazil to pray for people. Why won't He tell me how to pray for them?*

As my emotions swirled, I felt a shiver of fear. There had been so many spiritual attacks leading up to this trip. Was I safe here, spiritually? Alone?

“You are not alone.”

I let out the breath I didn't realize I was holding. I sat quietly for a minute, letting His assurance settle into me. From the moonlight overhead, I could see the face of my wristwatch. It was about one a.m. While the town was still alive with noise, inside the mission gates everything was quiet and dark. I looked all around me, feeling rather than seeing. That's when I sensed it: the spiritual protection around the mission; it was massive. I could feel the constant prayer that kept this place a light in the darkness. The fear that had snuck in with me wasn't real; it was a lie.

I stood up and with a boldness I didn't feel, I said, “Satan, you have nothing on me.” Then I said, “Heavenly Father, You called me to be here, and I am here.” I held out my hand, and asked Jesus to walk me back to my room. Though the fear was still in my heart with crushing intensity, I walked straight up the stairs in the dark, keeping my eyes only on Him.

It was afternoon of the second day. I was hungry and tired. Worse, I felt so alone, and not just because of the lack of human fellowship. I could no longer hear from God, or at least not the way I was used to. I heard basic things from Him, instructions for the day. But where was the intimate conversation I had come to love and depend on?

I couldn't feel His presence the way I normally did, either. And I couldn't understand why. I was at a mission, of all places! So many people were praying for me. *Where was God?* I didn't have an answer. All I could do was go through the motions. I tried not to be discouraged. The team would arrive the next day; something was bound to change.

I went back out to the terraced steps and sat down to work on my Bible study. The morning I had arrived in Brazil, God started me reading the Psalms, with the idea of writing a Bible study. Psalms is one of the most beautiful books in the Bible. Most of the anthems I grew up singing in the kids' choir were from the Psalms. Yet I admit I'd hardly glanced at a single Psalm in years. I couldn't imagine why God had me writing a study on the longest book of the Bible. And the vision He gave me for it seemed crazy – writing recipes for Psalm Smoothies! That wasn't anything like me. I was a warrior, after all, and a tough former New Yorker. But I was hardly in a position to question Him, so I sat in the sunshine and worked on Psalm Smoothies.

As I worked on my study, Ana came out to try and ask me something in Portuguese. She was with Claudia, another young woman I had seen outside a few times. We couldn't understand each other but we always exchanged smiles. Claudia always seemed somewhat nervous, and slightly overwhelmed; but whenever I saw her going about a chore, like scrubbing the steps or standing over the tiny outdoor washing machine, there was a peace about her. It seemed that she lived in difficult circumstances but had such a heart to serve the Lord. I wished I could talk with her and get to know her and help her with her chores, but I had to trust that God had His reasons why I was sitting here – helpless to communicate, helpless to do anything but wait for the team to arrive.

Ana used hand gestures to try and communicate, as Claudia held up a large piece of plastic. After a few attempts, with me failing to understand, Ana smiled graciously and motioned for me to follow. As they headed for my room, the pieces came together in my mind, and I said “Oh!” with a smile. There was no shower curtain in the bathroom; I realized they wanted me to let Claudia into my room, so she could hang the shower curtain she was carrying. Ana's eyes gleamed as she saw that I understood. She nodded.

I opened the door for Claudia (I hadn't bothered to lock it) and started to turn away and go back to my Bible study. Ana tapped me on the arm. She shook her head and motioned for me to go into the room. I started to motion that it was okay; I trusted both of them. That's when the Holy Spirit showed me it was not right for me to leave Claudia in a situation of temptation or vulnerability to anything that I, a stranger, might accuse her of later.

Though it went against what I felt in my heart, I agreed to stay in the room until Claudia was finished. As we walked out, for the first time since I'd arrived, I locked the door behind me. I learned that my idealism could not override God's wisdom. I was broke, I had nothing for anyone to steal, and I wanted to trust people. But God was doing a much bigger work in their lives and in this place. I needed to obey Him.

After that, Claudia wanted to wash the outside steps where I was sitting. I didn't know where I could work; the bedroom was way too small and didn't have a writing table. I saw Eduardo, another of the mission staff, at the bottom of the hill by the gate. I knew he understood a few words of English, so with words and gestures, I explained that I needed somewhere to write. He told me I could go sit inside the mission church.

“Where's the church?” I hadn't explored that far.

He pointed, and I could see a roof just beyond the gate at the bottom of the hill. I had thought that was the outer mission gate, but it wasn't. The gate to the mission was beyond it, farther down the hillside, facing the street.

I asked Eduardo if it was really okay for me to go into the church.

"Of course," he said with a shrug and a smile.

Though I didn't understand why, I felt that I would be intruding if I went into the church. Like I couldn't possibly be welcome there. After all, it wasn't my church. But I took Eduardo at his word and decided to go in.

The church door was open. It was a room that looked more like a tiny fellowship hall. A bunch of folding chairs were stacked against the walls. The place was broiling hot inside – January is summer in Brazil, and the average high in Niteroi was 95 degrees. The few windows that were open at the back of the church, and the small floor fan did little against the heat and humidity.

At the front of the room were a cross, a few banners, a drum set and an overhead projector. To the side was a glass window that looked into a small office. The office door was open and a woman was sitting inside. I assumed that was the mission office I'd been told about, and that the woman was Gabriela.

Eduardo came in and walked past me, carrying some papers; he nodded and we smiled at each other. He walked into the office and said a few words to Gabriela, left the papers on her desk, and smiled again as he walked past me. *I guess it really is okay for me to be in here.* I grabbed a folding chair, carried it to one of the tables at the back, and returned to the Psalms and my writing.

I didn't mind the heat; I grew up in the heat of south Florida, so this felt like home. I could hear noise on the street outside. The sounds of Portuguese were soothing. I was reminded of how easy it always was to study and write during the two years I lived in Siberia. A foreign environment; nothing except a table and chair, a notebook, a Bible, a pen in my hand – just God and me, simple and honest. I could have stayed there writing at that table forever.

A few people walked in and out of the church as I worked. I held my breath whenever I heard footsteps. Though I knew my fear was irrational, I kept expecting that someone would ask me to leave, or reprimand me for being in the church. But everyone left me alone.

One time the footsteps approached me, and I turned to see Pastor Tony smiling at me.

“I was going upstairs to check on you,” he said, “and here you are! I want to invite you to our worship service tonight. It’s at seven-thirty.”

Somehow that surprised me. Was he really inviting me to attend their service? Was it okay for me to be there? Again, those ridiculous fears! Ignoring the way I felt, I pointed into the main part of the church. “So I should be here tonight at seven-thirty?”

“Yes.” He smiled, patted me on the shoulder, and left.

I stayed at the church, writing, until about 6:30; then went up to my room to take a shower and get dressed. We had been advised to dress in conservative blouses and below-the-knee skirts for every church service, and to wear hose and dress shoes. Unfortunately, I had with me mostly long-sleeved blouses purchased in winter in the States. Though I knew it would be summer in Brazil, with all the stress leading up to the trip, I hadn’t thought things through.

Between the long-sleeved blouse and the hose, I was already broiling by the time I got back to the church. And I was deep in a spiritual battle. *They don’t really want you to go to their church service*, the enemy lied. *You don’t belong here*.

“Too bad. I’m going anyway.” There is an incredible amount of confidence in knowing without a doubt God has called you to be in a place. You don’t have to feel it; you just have to know it.

The moment I walked in the door, a man walked over to me with a big smile. He shook my hand and spoke in Portuguese. I smiled and shrugged.

“Jesus?” he said finally.

I nodded with a big smile. “Yes, Jesus.”

He nodded as everyone around us laughed.

I was swept up into a prayer circle with lots of shouting and praise. You don’t have to speak the language to know when the Holy Spirit is being summoned, and immediately He responded. God was very much in our midst.

The service began. The fan made a valiant effort but within five minutes everyone was dripping wet. Several men, evidently church elders, got up and started shouting, leading the congregation in prayer and praise. The worship band took over with Pastor Tony playing the drums. Handwritten Portuguese words went up on the overhead projector screen. I started to sing the words. By the time the first song was over, I had learned every rule of pronunciation in the Portuguese language. I had no idea what I was singing, but it had to be good, because the Holy Spirit was all over us.

The dance team came out then, all in costumes, flags waving; young women and little girls twirling around, waving streamers, clapping, grinning. Their moves were so graceful and they were beautifully surrendered to God. I found myself moving around much more than I would have in a church service back home. What a lively place – worship with total abandon. By the end of the second song, I had figured out some of the meaning of the words.

As the next song began, a man walked up to me. “Are you the American?” he said in English.

“Yes.”

He smiled. “I’m Sergio. I’m here to interpret for you.”

Hallelujah! Thank You, Jesus!

I was puzzled when Sergio offered me a Halls lozenge, but I accepted it. It was blackberry flavored. As I looked around, I noticed how many others in the church seemed to be eating Halls lozenges like candy. Why? It seemed too much to ask, so I let it go.

Sergio started to explain the meaning of the song lyrics, so I finally knew what I was singing. Within a few more minutes, I had the chorus of one of the songs memorized. By the end of the last song, I was singing in Portuguese and bouncing up and down as if I’d been worshipping in a Brazilian church all my life.

One of the elders got up to make announcements. Sergio explained that in a few weeks, the mission church would celebrate its anniversary with a pizza party. The elder was asking everyone to bring friends. The following Saturday, the church would have its monthly street ministry. Sergio explained that one Saturday every month, church members set up on a street corner, played worship music and preached the gospel to people walking by. Again, they asked everyone to please come and bring their friends.

After a few more announcements I heard the word “American,” and the elder was pointing at me. Sergio leaned over. “He is introducing you, and now everyone in the church will come and shake your hand.” Before he finished saying the words, the congregation was on their feet and sure enough, every single person came over and shook my hand. I didn’t know what was the appropriate greeting, so I just smiled and said, “God bless you” to everyone.

The elder announced Pastor Rick would be joining us for the service the following week, along with all the American missionaries. I could sense their anticipation of Rick’s preaching. The elder then admonished everyone to bring more people to that service. Sergio apologized to me that the service tonight was so small. Was it? I hadn’t felt such a presence of the Holy Spirit in worship in a long time. Perhaps they thought it was a small showing, but to me it was powerful. It was a reminder that I was here not to bring my worship culture to another place, but to experience theirs, and to see the mighty work God was doing among these people.

Another elder got up and started to talk. Sergio told me he was talking about an accident that happened that day. A woman was killed in the street, hit by a car, not a block from the mission. She had come each day to the mission feeding line, to get a meal for her family. They couldn’t afford to bury her. Such huge needs, and every new hardship made things worse. The mission was trying to reach out and address all the needs, but they were swimming against a tough current. Where were you supposed to begin?

The message I got that night in prayer was a lesson that years of humanitarian work had never taught me. Where *do* you begin? It’s obvious, isn’t it? You begin with God! It sounds simple. But try and keep that perspective when you’re surrounded by needs, and ill-equipped to meet them. Human nature says, “Fight. Get more resources. Get more people to help.” The enemy says, “Relax. Stop fighting. Depression and addiction are wonderful ways to soothe your soul.”

And God in His powerful whisper says, “Trust Me. Follow Me.”

The preacher that night was a guest, a friend of Pastor Tony's. I was grateful for Sergio, because I wouldn't have wanted to miss that awesome sermon. The guest preacher talked about grace and fellowship and the strength God builds into the Body of Christ. It was incredible to hear Sergio's comments on the sermon. He wasn't just listening and translating; he was living it. He took every word into his heart, and he had such a clear hunger for Scripture. He showed his willingness to learn and grow and let God bring changes to his life – right there in the worship service. It was awesome to see God working in his heart, so quickly, so deeply.

Sergio told me he was the first Christian in his family. He talked about how many new Christians were at this church. So many ended up sick, at home or in hospitals, and that's where the enemy tried to run over them. It was so important for the church staff to visit them and pray for them – not just for physical healing, but also for spiritual strength. In sickness and injury and addiction, they felt so vulnerable to losing their new faith. They didn't want to! They were determined that with God's help, the enemy would not defeat them.

So much need. Only God knows how to meet it. It begins with personal outreach, one on one. Nurture a new Christian. Encourage someone who faces overwhelming challenges, and remind them of God's provision. Keep someone's mind off their illness and help them focus on God's comfort and love. You don't need to have all the solutions. God already has those. Just be available and let Him use you. Be a constant light in the darkness, shining with His love in you, so that all will know and remember: God is with us. His Kingdom is now!

By the end of the worship service, though I was still feeling empty in prayer, I was charged up for the mission team to arrive the next day, and for the work we would do.

2

When Rick and the mission team arrived, it was like watching the sunrise. In some ways it seemed strange that my time alone with God had ended. But He was about to show me I could still have very personal time with Him in the midst of the great River that He was pouring out on His people in Brazil.

When the team arrived, my fast ended. I knew we would have a lunch meal together. I also came quickly to appreciate I wasn't the only one who would receive a meal because of the love offering the team brought. The mission has a feeding line every day at noon; people can come and get a hot meal to take home to their families. The meal is served in little foil containers – usually rice, vegetables and some kind of meat, along with bread that is freshly baked each morning in the little bread oven that was given to the mission a few years ago.

What I didn't know, during the time of my fast, was that the feeding line had run out of meat and was waiting for Rick and the team to arrive with the love offering. One of the first things we did as a group was place an order for chicken at a store down the street, and then walk down to pay for it. The chicken was delivered later that day. What a glorious sight to see an empty freezer being packed to the seams with chicken!

Meanwhile Betty, who helps lead the mission trips, took a team member to the store to purchase the groceries and water that would keep us going during our time there. When they returned, the upstairs kitchen overflowed with food. I said a heartfelt *Thank You* to God and I appreciated every bite of the lunch we shared.

Like all the other mission staff, the women that serve in the kitchen and feeding line are so filled with God's love; they have such a heart to serve. I knew the mission staff didn't live in great circumstances. As we learned, one of the women on the staff had come to the mission the first time to get something to eat. She was living in a tough situation at home with two daughters that were very sick and a husband that didn't know the Lord. By coming to the mission, she gave Jesus the chance to pour light into their lives. Her daughters recovered in the mission clinic, her husband was transformed, and now she is faithfully and tirelessly serving God in the mission and ministering to others.

The mission staff may live in poverty, but we could see God's blessing in their constant smiles. You could not miss the light of Jesus shining in their eyes. No matter how I was feeling, when one of the mission staff smiled at me, I couldn't help but be uplifted and I smiled back. I couldn't speak the language, but I felt that we communicated heart to heart. I wanted to take every one of them home with me.

Whether a staff member was scrubbing floors, cooking for the food line or navigating the mission bus through hairpin turns on mountain roads or through Rio traffic, which follows its own laws of physics, they were always smiling, always shining the light of Jesus. How can someone go from sweating outside in the sun, doing repair work or laundry during the day, to sweating at the church altar in the evening, leading worship and prayer, on fire with the Holy Spirit? All the while facing the daily hardship of life in a tough environment? Only by the grace of God and the love of Jesus.

Some were dealing with poverty, or illness in their families, or the frustration of trying to make a difference in a world of indifference. Some had come to the mission broken, and started to serve the Lord while they were still healing. The mission and the church aren't just there to meet a person's immediate needs. They bring people into ministry, so they can serve as God leads them, despite the battles in their lives. It always amazes me how the Lord takes people from different backgrounds, different struggles, and connects their lives together to build His Kingdom. I liked the way Betty described it, similar to Paul's words in Colossians: "God knits hearts together."

We all know God doesn't call the equipped; He equips the called. It's not unusual for Him to call people into ministry while they're still struggling, or going through deep healing. I know this firsthand, because it happened to me. I saw Him at work in the same way at the mission and through the mission church. What I saw gave me hope.

As I watched the mission staff leading worship, giving their all to God, and then going out to serve in the community; as I watched the faces of people wounded in soul but on fire in their spirit; I knew what I was seeing could only have been brought together by God. He isn't waiting for some ideal moment to build His Kingdom. He is building it right now, through each one of us. He meets us where we are and says, "Come with Me." On earth as it is in heaven.

The mission team dining area is on the top floor of the four-story mission building. It's open on two sides with an awning on one side, and it feels like a partly enclosed balcony. It was not only the place where we would eat every meal, but also where we would have our Bible study classes, praise and worship, and group prayer time. That afternoon, we sat there eating a delicious lunch and looking out over the town and the homes on the opposite hill. It was amazing to feel the warm breeze, see trees swaying outside, listen to kids playing on the patio next door – in the middle of what was our winter back home. It reminded me of my childhood in Miami, a time I associated with such freedom of walking in the Lord. God was about to start showing me He had chosen this setting for just that reason.

While the rest of the team spent the afternoon sleeping after their long flight, I sat in the dining area, drinking *guarana*, and continued my Psalms study. Cal, one of the team members, came out and asked me what I was doing. When I described to him the Psalm Smoothies, he scrunched his face and said, "Where in the world did you get an idea like that?" When I pointed heavenward, he said, "Oh." He didn't seem convinced. I spent the next half hour in a familiar inner battle, fighting off the enemy's taunts that I was crazy to think I could hear from God as a writer, or that God wanted me to write creatively, directed by Him, the Ultimate Creator.

In the evening, we met for dinner and then took a field trip to get ice cream. We rode in the mission bus to a little outdoor café on the waterfront. Anyone with a weakness for ice cream needs to be warned about this place. Inside were self-serve freezers, filled with an incredible variety of flavors. Each had spoons where we could get little scoops of ice cream, put them in a dish, and sample as many flavors as we wanted, with payment by weight. Though I knew Rick was paying for all of us, and that money could have been used elsewhere in the mission, I admit I sampled more flavors than I should have! But I enjoyed it so much, along with our time of fellowship.

As we sat eating ice cream at a picnic table by the water, watching a spectacular sunset that seemed to set the Christ the Redeemer statue on fire across the bay, I was again reminded of my childhood in Miami and church picnics at the beach. I was struck with a thought that nearly had me in tears: *I've missed God so much!* It seemed crazy to think that way. I was a Christian writer and intercessor. I spent all day chatting with God, and often all night too – praying, writing, seeking, just talking with Him. But something was missing. *What was it?*

Though I was enjoying the ice cream and the fellowship, my heart became aware of a painful separation between God and me. I didn't want that! As much as I had given my life to Him, in that painful moment of awareness, I vowed to surrender even more to Him. Whatever it took, I would keep surrendering until there was nothing left of me. I had said it before, and I said it again as I watched the sunset: *I would lay down my life for You, Lord. You know that.*

It would take a long while for Him to get through to my heart, so I could hear what He had been trying to remind me for years: *He had already laid down His life for me.* Until I could understand and believe that with all of my heart, I couldn't move forward to lay down my life in the way He wanted. I knew I was called, as we all are, to lay down my life for others. I didn't understand that I could only do this by His prompting, in His way. And I didn't realize that I couldn't lay down my life until I had truly accepted the new life He longed to give me.

I swallowed the last of the ice cream with a lump in my throat. I was grateful to get back on the bus and return to the mission, where I could just read my Bible and get lost in prayer.

I was blessed to have a roommate, Edna, who understood my need to read and pray silently at night. She was a worship dancer – I knew nothing about worship dance. She also wanted to read devotionals at night and listen to worship music on her CD player.

The album Edna was listening to that night, I'd never heard of. She let me listen. The music sounded so ethereal, and so delicate. It made me feel as if I could reach out my fingers and brush the golden hue of heaven, touch the beautiful face of God.

Soft colors and lights swirling around me. Jesus' arms holding me tightly. This wasn't like any worship music I had ever known. These were love songs, and they made my heart ache for reasons I couldn't explain. I left the room and went outside to pray in the darkness. I couldn't say a word and I couldn't feel the Holy Spirit. So I just cried.

3

On our first full day at the mission, we had more downtime than I was expecting. Rick and Betty assured us we would need it. They told us anytime they gave us a chance to rest, we should do it, because the experience would get increasingly intense as we went along. It was frustrating for those of us who wanted to jump right in and get to work. I think that's why I volunteered for every little task. I didn't want to miss any opportunities to serve. I wanted to help. People were struggling all around us. It seemed there was so much God needed to do. I didn't want to wait... even though God *wanted* me to wait.

We took a tour of the mission facility. I had already seen the church, but they showed us the administrative offices in the church building, introduced us to more of the staff, told us what each person did – I had only been able to guess up to that point. We went to see the radio broadcasting center upstairs at the church, then down by the front gate to the small garage where the mission truck is kept.

The truck is vital to the operation of the mission. It's used to transport supplies to and from the mission, and to transport clothing and food to families in need at a neighboring community, soon to become known to us as the Hill. Shortly before we arrived, the mission truck had blown a head gasket. I cringed when I heard that, because my own car suffered from the same injury and sat at a mechanic's lot back in Dahlonaga. It had sat there for nine months so far, because I couldn't afford the repairs and the daily increasing storage fees. I was always the one who wanted to help everyone else and make everything right in people's lives. Being without a car, I had started to learn about depending on others for help; I still had much more to learn about depending on God.

Niles and Kevin, two of the American guys on our mission team – one an electrician, the other a telecommunications salesman – felt the Holy Spirit prompting them to repair the mission truck by themselves. I'll never forget the look on Rick's face when he saw all the parts of the truck's diesel engine scattered across the concrete floor of the garage. He said a prayer and left them to their work.

After we finished touring the lower part of the mission facility, we climbed what always seemed like endless levels of steps back to the upstairs area. Though the property stretches up the hillside and the mission building is tall, it's also very narrow. It's deceiving how little space is actually inside the place. We went in to see the mission clinic on the very top floor. It was small but much cleaner and somewhat better equipped than clinics I'd seen in other countries. However, the medicine cabinet was almost bare. Rick would have to take some of the love offering and restock the pharmacy.

I was surprised at how many health services the clinic offered, including dental. Rick's brother is a doctor that comes in to serve in the clinic. This was a very important way of ministering to the community, and yet we were told that many in the community still didn't know the clinic or the church were there for them. One of the mission's ongoing tasks was to let people know they could come in and be cared for – in many ways.

I didn't know I'd soon be visiting the clinic again, for my own care. By that evening, it was obvious I might be in trouble. My glands were swollen and my throat was starting to hurt. It would not be the first time I got sick while overseas, so it didn't exactly worry me. With the years of illness I'd lived through until a few years earlier, when God gave me a miracle healing, I was certainly used to feeling sick. Very little about illness gave me cause for concern, but at this point it was inconvenient to say the least. I was here to serve. I could not, would not miss anything! *Please God. I just got here. I don't want to go back to the States yet.*

The next morning when I woke up, my throat was still sore but I was feeling a little stronger. I remembered on my first trip to Russia years earlier, I had a sore throat for six weeks; it cleared up when I left the country. I hoped this would not be the same. Regardless, I was ready to work.

We started the day, as we would every day for the rest of the trip, with praise and worship. I knew most of the songs in the worship book. Some of the team members were dancing around, singing with elaborate hand motions. I used to do things like that, when I was younger. Those long years of illness had taken that away from me. I couldn't lift my arms in the air without my hands and neck getting numb. Dancing was out of the question! I had received a miracle healing, yes, but my body was still paying the price for all those years of illness.

Rick was encouraging us to really get into worship. For him, that included dancing and clapping and waving arms. He didn't force it on anyone. Freedom of worship meant just that – freedom to jump around and sing, or freedom to stand still and worship quietly. I was singing but my hand movements were small and close to my sides. It was all I could do physically, but I was connecting deeply with God.

I believe one reason Rick gets enthusiastic about worship movement is that he's seen so many people afraid to express their joy and worship of God in the ways they really want to. He wanted to let us know this was a safe place to be whoever God wanted us to be, to express our praise exactly as we were led. No sense of repression. I understood that, and I would have given just about anything to express myself more. I felt the music within me, felt God all around me. But I couldn't do what I wanted; my body wouldn't let me. I had come to terms with that over the years, and I had peace. That was not repression.

Or was it?

Praise and worship was followed by three hours of Bible study, which we would do every day while we were in Brazil. The book God chose for us to study was Hebrews, and the focus was the ministry of Jesus, with other Scriptures brought in from the Gospels. We talked about authority in prayer and ministry, and listening to the Holy Spirit as Jesus showed us opportunities to minister.

During Bible study that morning, I had my first revelation. I had been in many discussions with fellow Christian writers on how to write about Christ-like behavior. We would always talk about: What Would Jesus Do? Now, as we discussed the book of Hebrews, God revealed to me that it wasn't just a matter of trying to figure out what Jesus would do. The author of Hebrews makes clear that Jesus is available to us at all times, and of course, Jesus said this Himself in Matthew 28:20. We don't have to figure out what Jesus would do. We can ask Him! Right now!

We talked about how Jesus had 30 years of preparation before beginning His ministry, which made me wonder why I was feeling so restless to get out and minister to people. We also discussed how Jesus let the Holy Spirit guide His ministry. He didn't stop to speak to or touch every person He passed. Sometimes He would single out a person in a crowd. How did He know? Because His Father told Him, through the Holy Spirit. Because God was doing a mightier work than any human could have imagined.

Before our Bible study session ended that morning, Betty talked to us about the prayer ministry we would do at the churches each night. These were mostly United Methodist churches in and around Rio, and our first church would be that very night. She gave us the general format of the services, talked about the dress code and told us we could expect to do anything from finding people in the congregation to lay hands on, to standing at the altar to pray for people as they came forward, to forming a prayer tunnel. This would all happen in whatever way Rick was led by the Holy Spirit.

Rick's focus would be on the moves of the Spirit within the congregation. He had code words for us, for where he wanted us to be, and when. We were to pay close attention to Rick and be ready to move quickly, whenever he gave a code word. We were advised to stay in prayer or in the Word during the service, because we would not understand the Portuguese and it would be too easy to let our spirits disconnect.

Betty asked if we had any questions. For us first-timers, it was hard to have questions about something we'd never experienced.

"You'll figure it out," she said with a smile, in response to our silence.

I was just eager to get out to the churches and start praying for people, and to see what God was doing among them. After all, that's what I was here for! I didn't know God had much, much more to teach me.

In the afternoon, we started doing some work around the mission. We had several jobs to do over the course of the trip: sort through the donated clothing Rick had brought from the States; fit the mission staff and church members with brand new sneakers; and do some painting and repair work at the mission, along with anything else that came up.

Kayla, one of our team members, had brought materials for an eyeglass ministry, and she needed help. I felt the Holy Spirit prompting me to get involved. That became the project I would be involved with that afternoon and most afternoons to follow. I couldn't have known how much the eyeglass ministry would bless me! But God knew.

Have you ever donated a pair of old eyeglasses? Or have you heard about someone collecting discarded eyeglasses? Ever wonder what happened to them? I was about to experience this firsthand.

I heard about eyeglass ministry years ago, when a friend went overseas with a group that gave eyeglasses to the poor. But she was an optometry student. I didn't know God could use someone like me in this type of ministry – someone who knew nothing about eyeglasses. Of course, that's the way God loves to build His Kingdom, through ordinary people moving outside their areas of experience. God does this, so that we know the work comes not from the person's expertise, but from Him.

We didn't have much to work with in the eyeglass ministry: a suitcase filled with second-hand eyeglasses organized by lens strength. Forget the sophisticated testing equipment you find in your optometrist's office. We used handheld testing lenses in little plastic holders. The lenses vary in strength. You put one lens on top of the other and hold them up for the patient to look through. No eye chart – during most of the testing, I *was* the "chart"! And none of us spoke the language.

Because of our limitations, we were able to witness the Holy Spirit working through us. Through this simple ministry, God increased my faith. And more than 100 people would be fitted with eyeglasses during our time there. What a blessing to see the smiles on their faces as God gave them new vision.

We had a couple hours for group prayer time before dinner, so we could get ready for the church that night. When I say group prayer, I mean we all sat around as a group, but we prayed privately, one on one with God, as the Holy Spirit led. God took me back into the Psalms and started giving me some unexpected healing. He revealed to me some lies the enemy had told me as a child and as a teenager.

I was so angered by those revelations – at the lies I had accepted so long ago. Though Rick had encouraged us to pray out loud whenever we felt the need, I didn't want to put the rest of the team through my version of screaming warfare. I didn't feel led by the Holy Spirit to do that either, and besides, by that time my throat was killing me. So I just started shouting under my breath at Satan.

I told him he had no right to lie to a child like that. To give her such an unreasonable sense of burden and to fill her with discouragement. Before long, I was praying blessings over my future children and I felt such an amazing breakthrough. Was this one of the reasons God brought me to Brazil? To experience that incredible healing?

But I was there for more than this, and I started to focus on prayer for that night's church service. I reminded God that I wanted Him to show me what *He* was doing in this place. I asked Him to show me what He wanted for the people we'd minister to: "Father, what's Your vision?"

"Go to the balcony wall. I will show you." God's voice was quiet, but I felt a sense of His excitement. I was excited too – to be hearing from Him again, in the way I was used to. Finally!

I obeyed, and walked to the balcony wall. As I looked across to the opposite hill, I could see the simple homes. And right there, the Lord spread out a vision before me, of an expansive garden with trees and plants and flowers of all colors. There was a huge fountain in the middle. I could hear the water. I could see birds flying from branch to branch. At the front of the garden was an iron gate. The gate was flung wide open and I heard the voice of the Lord: "The people don't know they can come in."

It wasn't until much later that I understood what He meant me to see. But I knew He was pouring out His Spirit in a massive way in this place.

Then He took me to Psalm 91:

“Because he has set his love upon Me, therefore I will deliver him; I will set him on high, because he has known My name. He shall call upon Me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him and honor him. With long life I will satisfy him, and show him My salvation.”³

I couldn't wait to get to the church that night to see what the Lord was doing!

I'd heard about this church before I got to Brazil. I'd heard from those who went on previous mission trips from my church back home in Dahlonega. The church we were about to visit was growing in the middle of a harsh community controlled by armed gangs. Such an unlikely place for a church to grow and yet it was flourishing. The Holy Spirit was kicking butt.

The mission team bus needed a special escort to get into the community. The escort signaled a silent message to everyone that we were invited and welcome. The gangs respected the church. One of the earlier teams had been there when a group of gang members followed the Holy Spirit into the church one night and were saved. The church had come a long way since then.

The place was lively when we arrived. Hardly room to move: people dancing, shouting, singing praises, giving all they had to God. The foundation of the building seemed to shake. It seemed like the walls were swaying with celebration. I could hear shouts echoing back from heaven, angels reveling with the people in praise.

³ Verses 14-16, NKJV

Things quieted down a little as the pastor made announcements and introduced us. Rick spoke a few words and then called the mission team up front, to sing. That would become a regular routine at the church services, and quite an experience. Rick would call us up in front of the congregation, and we'd line up in two rows behind him – all 12 of us. He'd bring out his guitar, pick a song none of us knew, and thrust microphones into our hands. We'd smile and sing in the spirit, as if we knew what we were doing. Someone described it as Rick and the Pips. I felt like we were the Von Trapp family.

After that, the intensity of the service seemed to fade. I think this happens often in worship services, not just in Brazil, but everywhere. Praise and worship stirs everyone up, as they seek God's presence, but then they fall into the order of worship and let Him go. They forget that the Holy Spirit is always with us and wants our constant attention. If we can't do that for the duration of a worship service, how can we do it living daily in the world?

We had a pastor with us on the team, and Rick called on him to preach, while Rick interpreted for the congregation. We prayed for his message. God responded! It didn't take long. The pastor started walking back and forth, shouting, "Who do you say Jesus is? Who do you say He is?"

The place erupted. We felt the blast of the Holy Spirit sweep through the congregation, lifting everyone into His blazing fire. This unlikely church, these souls who lived impoverished, amid gang wars; this place where God chose to light a flame for all to see... in an instant, the place was transformed. I could feel eternity all around me.

Welcome to the Kingdom.

The place was charged up. The Holy Spirit was blazing and souls needed saving.
Where were they?

We formed a prayer line at the altar and Rick called for those seeking salvation to come forward. Nobody moved. He walked up and down the aisles, speaking in Portuguese, listening to the Spirit.

Finally, he headed for the back of the church.

"Here he goes," whispered Pat, who was standing next to me. This was not her first mission trip with Rick. She had seen it before.

With quick strides, Rick walked out the back door and into the street. Clearly he was going to find someone to save. A few minutes later he reappeared, bringing a young man with him. He led the man to the center of the prayer line. “He wants to be saved. Pray for him!”

As we surrounded the young man, Rick headed toward the back door again. It was obvious the Holy Spirit and Rick were just getting started. Before long, the prayer line was flooded.

Later Rick said, “I didn’t know I was going to do it. The Holy Spirit told me to go.”

He had followed the Holy Spirit to the bar across the street, where he ran into an armed gang. He spoke to the gang leader, asked if he didn’t need prayer, didn’t need Jesus. The guy put aside his weapon and nodded. After that, the others in the gang knew it was okay to come into the church.

What struck me that night was not the number of salvations, the number of people healed, or the way the Holy Spirit led gang members into the church. Those were amazing moments. But what struck me the most was the way the congregation reacted. I watched the way they embraced the people brought in off the street; came over and patted them on the backs, smiled, spoke to them. The way they offered encouragement and gave thanks for what God was doing in their lives. The way some of the congregation stepped forward to minister to these people, to lead them off to the side to talk, to join Rick in bringing people forward for prayer, and praying for them.

That’s why a church can grow in a place like this. Because God calls people to steward it, to nurture others in their faith, to keep the Spirit alive. And they, obedient, respond.

Each salvation, each return to Christ is incredible. But what happens next? We can’t focus on the glorious numbers in a single night, the extent of what God is doing at the church level, and neglect the individual lives that need to be nurtured. Each one is precious to the Lord; each one, a child of His Kingdom.

God works through us to build His Kingdom, to keep it growing each day, stirring hope toward that eternal Kingdom we seek. In a tough, poor neighborhood in Brazil, I saw brothers and sisters in Christ who understood what it takes to build the Kingdom. They didn’t just understand it; they lived it.

The church we visited that night had a praise band and dance team, as did every church we would visit on this trip. The musicians worked with what they had: a worn-out guitar, a trumpet that was perpetually flat, one instrument shared among 10 self-taught musicians. They gave it their all – praise and worship with no bounds. I’ve heard that some of the best new worship music is coming out of Brazil, and I believe it. An interpreter at one service kept asking me if a song was American, translated into Portuguese. On a few occasions the answer was yes, but most of the songs were Brazilian – and truly awesome.

God loves our heartfelt praise and worship, regardless of our limitations. He loves praise and worship even in churches where the music is weak, where instruments are broken, where opportunities are limited. He doesn’t look at the polish; He looks at the heart.

But when we can help put a new instrument in a musician’s hand, or let two play instead of one, or fix a broken piano... doesn’t God call us to put as much emphasis on giving in praise and worship as we do in meeting other needs? I know this better than anyone, having received the gift of a donated drum set. What a difference it made in my daily praise and worship, until I felt the Lord leading me to give it to someone else. And when I was asked to play piano for some worship services at our church back home, a loaner keyboard made a huge difference.

I had never thought of this as a need for giving; I should have known better. New instruments. *Any* instruments. Something to build praise and worship, to encourage worship leaders, to tell them, “Go for it! Give the Lord your all!”

After seeing the struggle with broken musical instruments that night, Rick decided to use some of the mission trip love offering to buy a few instruments for some of the churches. He also started asking for donations of used musical instruments from the States. It wasn’t much, but it was a start. More importantly, it left a message of encouragement that said, “God wants you to keep praising Him with all you’ve got!”

In the church that night, I felt a strong burden to pray for a young woman. She didn't ask for prayer. She was helping out in the service, helping with praise and worship, helping bring people to the prayer line. I didn't have a chance to lay hands on her, though I wanted to. She was never nearby, and the Holy Spirit kept directing me to others. But the burden for her remained with me.

As we sat down to listen to the message that night, I started to pray for her in the spirit. I alternated praying for her with praying for the message, for the church, for the pastor, for those God would call to the prayer line later in the service. As I prayed for all those other needs, I continued my prayers for her. I had lost visual sight of her, but she was on my heart.

The Lord showed me that she was uncertain over a big decision that would affect her career, her calling. She was afraid to trust God but more afraid not to trust Him. Excitement and fear wrapped together. She needed His peace.

When the service was over, the place was a madhouse. People were everywhere, talking, hugging, shouting. I gave up trying to catch one last glimpse of this woman, and I went to collect my things. As I lifted my Bible from the chair, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned around. It was the woman I had been praying for.

"May I ask that you continue to pray for me?" she said in broken English.

"Of course I will."

"My name is Anita. I am learning English," she added, lowering her gaze.

It was so cool to finally have her name.

"You're speaking very well, Anita."

She looked up and smiled. "You'll pray for my work?"

"I will!" I hugged her. "Jesus is with you. Trust Him."

Rick had told us that after each service, the church would prepare a little snack for us. Little snack? We were led upstairs to the biggest feast I had seen in years. Perhaps the biggest gift of all was to see the smiles on the faces of the ladies who had obviously worked so hard to put this meal together. I knew this church couldn't have had much money. I was amazed at how much they wanted to show us their appreciation for what God was doing in their midst – and to show us the love of Jesus.

4

I woke up with my throat still hurting and I was feeling achy again. I was determined to keep singing during our praise and worship time, but with a sore throat it was getting harder. I kept thinking about the Halls lozenges I had seen at the mission church – was it just a few days ago? – where people were eating Halls like candy. What I wouldn't give for my own stash of Halls!

We had a lesson that morning on the baptism of the Holy Spirit. I went through this experience when I was a youth, but something never felt quite right. I didn't feel free about it. Clearly the enemy had wanted to keep me from living fully in the Holy Spirit. Over the years, I continued to grow in the Spirit and as an intercessor, but always in the back of my mind I knew something was wrong. I didn't understand the authority I had through the Resurrection of Jesus, and the enemy seemed determined to keep me from claiming those Scriptures.

As we talked about the baptism of the Holy Spirit and read over the Scriptural foundation I desperately needed, I listened with fresh ears and especially with my heart. Rick had told me just that morning to turn off my brain until further notice! I needed to hear God's Word with my heart, and with my spirit – not just with my mind. As God brought deeper understanding to me about moving in the Holy Spirit, I felt the greatest freedom I'd known in a long time.

I looked at Dan, a teammate who had the same expression of new freedom on his face that I probably had on mine. I guessed he had the same kind of breakthrough that morning. We looked at each other and I think we laughed. At the same moment, Betty pointed to both of us and said, “I recognized you two as sputter-ers.”

That was a good way to describe what I felt. As a spiritual warrior I had been going at 500 miles an hour for God – with a huge clog in my fuel line. Suddenly that clog was gone! Rick had talked about how during this mission experience, Jesus would minister to us, and we would see blockages in our lives peel away like layers of an onion. When Rick walked in after the session on the Holy Spirit, he looked at Dan and said with a hint of surprise, “Your onion is blooming!” Then he turned to me, waved his hand through the air and said, “Your onion just exploded.”

We had some free time after that to process what had happened. I talked for a while about the Holy Spirit with Dan, my fellow “sputter-er.” Then I confessed I had felt a sense of spiritual struggle before I came on this trip and had thought about finding a different church after I got home – even though I *knew* I was in the church where God wanted me, the church He Himself had called me to. I knew my “struggle” was nothing more than the enemy – a defeated enemy – messing with me.

I also confessed that I was nervous around clergy, in fact I was downright fearful, and hesitant to ask permission to hold a ministry event at a church. And I was flat-out afraid to join my church back home, even though I’d been there a year, loved the church and wanted to join.

Why all these fears? I grew up in the church! When I was a kid, it seemed that I practically lived there. My mom was a church secretary, my father was a church financial secretary and my grandmother was a church organist and in charge of the acolytes. I was constantly involved in countless church activities and camps. None of these fears made sense to me; I had no idea where they came from, except to realize the enemy had really done a number on me over the years. And I had let him.

As I talked, I realized how ridiculous all of it was, and I made the decision to start dealing with these fears by joining my church back home, as soon as this trip was over. I asked Lynn and Craig if they would give me moral support when we got back to our church, and they said, “Of course!”

Though it was just one step forward, I felt such immense relief. It felt like a breakthrough. Surely this would end my recent, awful feeling of separation from God. I was so excited that I sent an email report home to the intercessors who were praying for us. I talked about the worship experience the night before, shared about my spiritual breakthrough, and asked for prayer for the people we were ministering to in Brazil.

The long conversation that afternoon was healing, but in the middle of it I began to lose my voice. By the time we arrived at the church that evening, my voice was gone. Some might have said it was a blessing to have me quiet! But how was I supposed to pray?

The people at these churches were used to hearing prayer spoken in a loud voice. Even though we weren't praying in Portuguese, they needed the assurance of hearing us talk to God along with them. I did the best I could that night, whispering the words of prayer right up next to each person's ear. I knew God was getting through. That was all that mattered.

Later that evening, someone took pity on me and offered me my own roll of Halls lozenges.

Prayer at these churches was like nothing I'd experienced before. I was used to praying for one person at a time. We did that in Brazil, but there was a crowd standing behind them, waiting. Prayer for one person couldn't last all night, not if we wanted to reach the whole church.

I was used to having specific needs shared with me. That didn't mean I always knew, going in, what I was praying for, or what God would reveal. And the Holy Spirit would often call me to pray for situations I didn't know about personally, for people I'd never met. He would either reveal to me a word or feeling about their specific prayer need, or He would work on so many levels that I simply knew He was doing His thing, and it really didn't matter what I knew or didn't know. I was just a prayer vessel, and that's all He needed.

That was fine in the prayer room, when the person wasn't standing right in front of me. It was disorienting to lay hands on someone, to have no way to communicate verbally, and to pray for them in English when they didn't understand a word. No wonder God used this as the perfect opportunity to teach me how to pray – not the way I'd always done it, but the way He wanted me to.

I was used to taking my time with intercession, to letting the Holy Spirit ease His way in around the clogs in my fuel line. Not in Brazil. I had about 20 seconds to discern the prayer need. Otherwise, get out of the Holy Spirit's way and let Him come charging in, let Him blast open the fuel line!

This was a very good thing. After enough blasts, I was open to hearing His voice in those first seconds, or trusting Him to reveal the need as I prayed. This changed the way I pray for people, even when I speak the language and know the needs. As I learned in Brazil, the needs expressed might not be the core need Jesus wants to heal – a core healing that will reach to all those other areas of need.

When people come to receive prayer or ask for prayer, it's easy enough to respond. But go out into the congregation and find someone to pray over – someone who might not want your hand on their head? How do you do it? How do you know you'll pray for someone who is receptive?

Follow the Holy Spirit.

We didn't just choose people at random; we had to listen and watch for the person the Holy Spirit led us to. Most of the time, I discovered Jesus was already ministering to the person, and they were already in prayer, or ready for it. Even when it took them by surprise, they were receptive, because they as a congregation had invited us. They allowed the Holy Spirit to get in and go to work.

After we got back from the church service that night, we had a time of group worship and prayer in the dining area. The summer night breeze seemed to pick up, as Rick started ministering to those who wanted the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Rick and Betty came up to me and interceded while Jesus blasted open my clogged fuel lines for good! Dan, my "sputtering" friend had the same experience. Free at last! Hallelujah!

Rick kept trying to raise my arms straight up in the air as I prayed. I kept pulling them down so my neck and my head wouldn't get numb. I already had a raging sore throat and a fever. Wasn't that enough suffering for one night? But every few minutes, Rick returned to pull my arms up again. Finally I said to God, *All right. If this is what You want, I will trust You.*

In that moment of surrender, I felt the rush of the Holy Spirit through me, more powerfully than I'd felt Him in my life. I'd been charged up with Holy Spirit fire before, but this was off the charts! My vocal chords had quit working earlier that night, but I started shouting up a storm in the spirit and didn't think I would ever stop.

Tearfully, and with a boldness I had never known, I prayed for God to help me, so that no lie from the enemy, or *anything* else would keep me separated from Him in any way, ever again. All that He wanted for me – I wanted it too! *I surrender, I surrender... Abba Father, I surrender ALL to you, for real this time. All of me! I trust You!*

As for the pain and numbness in my neck, in my head... *Lord, please help me, so that this pain, this dizziness won't ever keep me from giving You my all in worship. All of me! You are worth it!*

I was so caught up with God that I wasn't focused on anything happening around me. But I could hear what seemed like distant sounds of praise and prayer, and of the warm night breeze rustling through the trees and whispering against the awning. God's presence was everywhere. I had my eyes closed in the darkness but it was a beautiful sight.

I heard the sound of a guitar, and Rick started to sing the chorus of "Revelation Song":

*Holy, holy, holy
Is the Lord God Almighty
Who was and is and is to come.
With all creation I sing
Praise to the King of kings.
You are my everything
And I will adore You.*

Jesus stood before me.

He reached out His hand.

“Dance with Me,” He whispered.

I didn't move from my chair. But in the awesome vision in my spirit, I danced with the Lord and I was undone. To this day, when I hear that song, or even think about the words, my heart almost stops, and I can't breathe. I am blown away by His love and the way He reached out to me that night. I knew it was just the beginning.

LET THE RIVER
CARRY YOU

5

I woke up with a new sense of expectation, a new desire to really listen to what God wanted to tell me. It seemed I was in a good space to listen, because I couldn't talk! I had started whispering the night before, but even that was tearing up my throat. So I wrote a note at breakfast, telling everyone I wouldn't even whisper today; just be silent.

Meanwhile, I was getting addicted to the Bible study sessions.

You hear it all the time: "Feed on His Word." It wasn't until I had no choice, during those first days of fasting, that I understood: the Word of God provides vital nourishment! Without it, we starve.

As a devotional and Bible study writer, I was always concerned with meditations on a verse of Scripture, applying it, encouraging others to reflect on the verse and ask God to speak to them. I was very concerned that readers would open their Bible, spend time in it, and claim the Word for themselves.

I didn't follow my own advice. At all. I was too busy telling others to read the Word of God and not feeding on it myself.

When I was in Brazil, God drew me deeper into His Word than I had ever ventured. Three hours of Bible study every morning created discipline. But it was more than that. God made His Word come alive.

As I opened my Bible to follow what was being taught, I found myself drawn into the words, as if I were literally standing in the Bible, surrounded by His presence. I could hear God speaking to my heart, to my spirit, refreshing me, bringing revelation. It was as if all of heaven opened up around me, the River of God flooding my spirit and my soul from just a few lines on the page.

In the past, I would often listen to Scripture being read, without reading it for myself. No longer. I couldn't go anywhere without my Bible. The moment I heard Scripture being read, or a verse cited or brought to mind, I had to open and read it for myself. I had to immerse myself in the living Word. I had to feed on it!

I was like a starving person offered a choice: "Listen as I describe a meal to you... or dive into this dish of food!" I love to eat. But if I had to make a choice between giving up the food I love, and giving up my Bible... I would rather be physically hungry than lose the nourishment of God's Word.

Once I realized that, God began to use His Word to minister to me in powerful ways. I was used to seeking God for a verse to share with someone that asked for prayer. That was barely a glimpse of what He wanted to offer. Now, as I cried out to Him for direction in prayer, for the needs of others and for my personal needs, He responded with passages of Scripture, with whole Psalms that came to me in the moment I needed them. I began to be nourished by a never-ending flood of His wisdom, comfort and hope.

That morning during Bible study, I was hearing from God things I'd never heard from Him before. Or if I'd heard them, I hadn't paid attention, or I'd forgotten. As we read further in Hebrews, and listened to the Lord speak about our growing up in the Kingdom, taking authority, becoming co-heirs with Jesus, He started to show me glimpses of His Kingdom alive in us. It was a vision filled with colors and streamers and dancing – not what I expected! He kept telling me, "You're My daughter. Dance with Me."

I was sure this was a spiritual message only, and He didn't literally want me to start dancing. No way could my body handle it! Besides, I knew nothing about worship dance. When Edna danced at the beginning of each service – and I knew she danced prophetically, as the Holy Spirit led her in each moment – the moves seemed so graceful, and so coordinated. I was neither! Surely, the Lord did not expect me to dance.

I had to admit, though, I was enthralled as I watched the dance teams at each church. They worshipped with total abandon, yet with incredible grace. They seemed to get lost in the worship, and yet their moves were beautifully choreographed, and I felt that they were connecting heart to heart, spirit to spirit with each person in the congregation; that God was somehow speaking to each of us, revealing His presence through their movements and colors, in ways beyond what words can describe. It was clear that the Holy Spirit was bringing everything together. You could see His visible movement through the dance team.

Just watching the dancing opened a new dimension of worship for me. It ministered powerfully to me, especially now that my voice was gone and I couldn't sing. When one of the dance teams brought out banners in the middle of the service, I felt that God Himself was walking among us, His presence manifest. I could hardly stay upright, and it wasn't because I was physically ill.

I never realized how much of the worship experience I was missing by not looking at the dancing, the streamers, the colorful banners and tambourines, and pageantry. It's biblical – I came to understand that, the more Edna shared with me. As the dancers worshiped the Lord in so many dimensions, He drew us, the worshiping congregation into the Throne Room. He offered us a vision of His Kingdom that was so spectacular, only weeping for joy could I express what I was seeing. I had felt it many times in the spirit, but had never before seen it with my eyes. *Seeing was powerful!*

Relentlessly, God pursued me with this imagery, using it even as He spoke to me through His Word. I wanted to stay immersed in Hebrews and keep hearing from Him. It wasn't a new thing for me, to hear from God; it happened in intercessory prayer all the time. But this was deeper, more intense, and had more dimensions than anything I'd ever experienced. I wanted to explore the depths of God. I wanted to explore His heart!

Instead of imagining Jesus sitting across from me as I wrote my Bible study notes, I could *see* Him now – in lights, in colors, in textures I couldn't comprehend, in depths upon depths of love. I could feel His presence through every word of Scripture – it was overwhelming. Perhaps it was good that I had no voice, because I might have disrupted the entire Bible study session by tossing my notebook in the air, jumping up and down, shaking the table and bursting with joy, all the while shouting, "Hallelujah! The Awesome Creator of all things is taking the time to teach *us* His Word. *Hallelujah!*"

My hunger grew. I wanted more!

I couldn't get enough!

By the end of the Bible study session that morning, I was overflowing with spiritual nourishment. But my physical body was fading. I had a horrible pain in my throat, my glands were like golf balls and I felt feverish. I was starting to feel tightness in my chest. *Please God, tell me this isn't bronchitis.* I hadn't suffered from that since my youth, but it had been chronic back then. This could not be happening now! I was starting to worry that I might be contagious to everyone around me. Again, I prayed this wasn't something that would force me to leave Brazil. God was just getting started with me, and I didn't want to miss a thing!

Rick sent me upstairs to the clinic to get some medication. The nurse replenished my supply of Halls lozenges and gave me something that seemed to be an antihistamine. She said the doctor – Rick's brother – would be in that afternoon, and I should come back and let him examine me, to be sure it wasn't an infection that would require an antibiotic. I gratefully accepted; I needed to know what we were dealing with. Meanwhile, I was thankful to have the Halls lozenges. I could hardly stand the pain of swallowing.

After lunch, we took the eyeglass ministry and went mobile. We went around the mission to check the staff members.

How do you test patients for eyeglasses when you don't speak their language and they don't speak yours? Do you work through an interpreter? We discovered very quickly that's not always an option, especially when the only available interpreter is busy running a mission! So we found a different kind of interpreter, and this turned out to be an incredible blessing: we relied on the Holy Spirit!

We started out with prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to guide us and minister to each person receiving eye care. We asked that He speak through us in a language we could all understand. We asked Him to keep the patients and us calm, dissolve any frustrations, so we could do the work God wanted done. Without fail, the Holy Spirit went to work among us immediately.

By the second day, we had a working vocabulary: “for reading,” “for distance,” “better,” “worse,” “perfect,” “good eyes,” “dry eyes,” and a few creative gestures that showed “eye drops before bed = eyes that feel better in the morning.” This Holy Spirit language got us through most eye exams, and we only sent for an interpreter in emergencies.

Sometimes a patient would say what they thought we wanted to hear, rather than what they really felt. We relied on the Holy Spirit for discernment. He helped us understand what was really going on, so we could get past the patient’s self-consciousness or fear and get them fitted with the glasses they needed.

It was incredible to see Jesus moving and speaking through the patients and the team. As I replay those moments in my mind, I don’t remember any of it taking place across a language barrier. I recall every word, every thought, every heart, as if we had spoken the same language. *We did*. It was the language of the Holy Spirit that connected us.

Our objective in the eyeglass ministry was vision testing and eyeglass fitting. But for many patients, this might be the only time someone examined their eyes. Kayla was trained to look for certain indicators that a further doctor’s exam was needed.

Most of the problems seemed to be dry eyes, for which we gave them moisture drops. But in a few cases, the problems were more serious and Kayla notified Rick that the individual needed medical care. One of the young women at the church showed signs of a growth in her eye. It looked pretty advanced, so Kayla told Rick that the woman would need to see a doctor. But we also consulted the Ultimate Physician about her situation, and we prayed in total belief for her healing.

We were nearly finished with our eye exams for the day when I was called upstairs to the clinic for my medical exam. Rick’s brother was there. I was nervous as I walked up the stairs, but I knew Jesus was with me. I told God: *No matter what’s wrong with me, I don’t want to leave Brazil. If I have to take a day or two off and keep away from the others, that’s fine, but I want to stay. If You want me to leave, You’ll have to give a very strong word to Rick, ordering me back to the States; that’s the only way I’ll leave.*

This seemed a familiar plea. Years ago, I had begged God to let me stay in Russia after I was attacked by dogs with rabies. I was more concerned with being able to stay and continue my work than I was about the fact that I had been exposed to a deadly disease. God intervened then; He saved my life, and kept me in Russia until my work was done. I asked that He intervene again now. I didn't believe He'd brought me all the way to South America, and through all of these breakthroughs, to let a little illness take me away from this. He had plans for me here, and He would fulfill them.

The doctor looked at my throat and listened to my lungs. He determined what I had was an allergic reaction, and he prescribed a stronger antihistamine. *Hallelujah!* Though I didn't feel any better physically, I felt stronger in my spirit. I knew I wasn't contagious and wouldn't have to leave. I also knew God was firmly in control and still had things for me to learn here, and work for me to do.

I had no idea He had a massive breakthrough for me to experience – one that would change my life forever.

We were well into the worship service at a really lively, Spirit-filled church that evening. It seemed everyone in the congregation was already deep in prayer before we started to move among them, finding individuals to pray for. I worked my way toward the back of the church, following the Holy Spirit, stopping wherever He pointed someone out to me.

At the back, several of us hit a "traffic jam," so I moved around the others and headed up the far aisle. I didn't feel led to stop anywhere, just kept moving. As I neared the front of the church, I felt the Holy Spirit drawing me in. He was pointing me toward a man I recognized as one of the church elders who had greeted us earlier. He had his head bowed in prayer.

I felt intimidated. I knew church leaders needed prayer – lots of it! But to walk up and lay hands on him... Would he be offended? Bored? Annoyed?

"Go!"

The Holy Spirit's voice was insistent.

I walked over and put my hand on the man's head. As I prayed in the spirit, he started crying.

“He can’t hear Me,” Jesus said softly. “He turned his heart away from Me for a moment, and he thinks I’m gone.”

With no voice whatsoever, I somehow vocalized in hoarse English what the Holy Spirit gave me to say, which was something like this: “Lord Jesus, I know You’re right here with my brother. Reach out to him, Lord. He needs You. I know You’re still the Lord of his life. Draw him in. I know You’re here, and You won’t leave him. You are with him every step. Show him, Lord. Show him Your presence. Show him Your love.”

The man doubled over and wailed, his shoulders heaving. I knew he was healing. I knew Jesus had His arms around him.

The same man walked over to me later for prayer, when we formed a prayer line at the altar. His look of relief, of peace, of restored hope made my heart rejoice.

It would have been so easy to let intimidation stop me from walking up to him in the first place. To pretend I didn’t hear the Holy Spirit asking me to pray over this church leader. To go back to my seat and pray for him at a distance. Thank God for His never-ending grace. Jesus gave me *His* boldness to respond when the Holy Spirit said, “Go!” In turn, I was so blessed to watch, up close, as the Lord restored the hope of His servant.

6

The medicine was helping, and I knew I was beginning to recover. But my body still felt so weak. I was determined to press on. I'd spent so much of my life dealing with illness that I was stubborn about it. I could find strength to get through it, because I'd done it so many times. Therein was a very big weakness: Where did the strength come from? From God? Or from my stubbornness? How many times had the enemy used that weakness against me? Neither the enemy nor I knew that God was about to teach me a life-giving lesson.

By the end of our morning Bible study, I was feeling miserable. My glands were still swollen, my fever had returned, and my throat felt like a knife was stuck in it. I was consuming Halls lozenges at a rate that approached insanity. I knew from the doctor that there was nothing more I could do. I just had to put up with it. That's when the enemy decided to see how far he could push me. He knew that nothing could shut me down faster than a migraine.

Somehow I made it through lunchtime and even managed to eat a little. Then I went to lie down; we had maybe two hours before we needed to assemble for prayer. It was impossible to sleep, with my head in a vice. Perhaps God would have preferred that I find some strong drugs and spend the rest of the afternoon and evening in bed. I told Him I didn't fly all the way to South America to sit on the sidelines. Regardless of what He might have preferred, He was ready to make the most of my stubbornness.

When the mission bell rang, I struggled upstairs to the open area for group prayer. My intent was to pray for the service that night, but that didn't happen. Within minutes, I dragged myself over to a corner, sat curled up on the floor, sobbing silently, begging God to make the pain go away.

He could have, in an instant. I knew that. But He didn't take away my headache. Instead, through the pounding of the migraine, I heard Him speak.

Quietly. Gently.

Rather than meeting Him with our usual back and forth, which was often more "forth" from my end, I just let Him talk. Through the fever, the throbbing in my head, the raw throat, the burning hot tears, and the exhaustion beyond all exhaustion, I just listened.

Do you trust Me, Daughter? You know I am with you in all that you do. Do you believe I will guide every step you take, even when you're falling? I will guide you, no matter what you feel. You know that if you ask Me again to take away the pain, I will. But tell me... why would you settle for that, when I want so much better for you?

I didn't know what He meant by that, but my tears were unstoppable at the tenderness in His voice, in His promise. If only it didn't hurt so much. I wasn't sure which hurt more: the migraine, or His deep love.

Daughter... I will walk you through everything the world uses to beat you down; you know that. What you don't understand is why. Why do I summon all the power of heaven, every time you ask? Why? Why do I want you to expect so much more? Daughter, hear Me. Understand. It's because you're My daughter. My precious, beloved daughter. I want everything for you. I want the Kingdom for you.

My head was pounding, my vision blurred from tears and pain. I would die on that floor – I was sure of it. I did the only thing I could do: I gave myself up to the Holy Spirit. Without my even having to ask, He showed me how to pray:

Father. I trust You in all things. I trust You with my life. You know that. I don't understand what's happening to me right now, but I do know there's more You want to give me, and Abba, I will let You. This headache is killing me, and everything within me screams that I can't get through this physical torment. Abba, You are bigger than this headache; You are bigger than all of my weakness. You can restore my body and my spirit, no matter how the enemy tries to punish me. Father, I will go to this church tonight, with a migraine if need be, and trust that You will lead me through it and work Your will in this situation, for Your glory. Jesus, My Savior, I need You. I need You! You are everything to me! I know You understand.

Someone in the group prayed for me that afternoon, during our prayer time – without knowing about my migraine or any of the conversation that had just taken place between God and me. That prayer opened the door for what God so intensely desired for me to understand with my heart: that I am His precious daughter. Truly. Forever. He wants me to have not just good, but His very best.

The healing He wanted for me was not just physical, or even spiritual. He wanted to bring me the deep emotional healing I needed; healing in my heart that I did not know I needed. He wanted a brand new life for me – the very life He intended for me all along.

I hadn't begun to experience that healing yet. But I would, over the months to follow. It began that afternoon. As I surrendered more to Him, He gently began to pry open the door of my heart.

The question God asked me that afternoon is one we need to ask ourselves every day. *Why* was I willing to settle for “just” having my pain taken away? Yes, that was a big request, something I really needed in that moment. But why stop there? Why are we willing to “settle” for what's good, when He wants His very best? *He wants the Kingdom for us!*

God didn't need to prove to me His healing power over illness. He had done that many times. What I needed to learn was that no infirmity and no attack by the world or the enemy could take the keys to the Kingdom out of my hand – not after Jesus put them there for all time! My walk is sealed by the Blood of Jesus, and that's eternal!

By the time we boarded the bus to go to the church that evening, my headache was gone. So was my fear that *anything* could separate me from our Father's eternal love. It was no longer just head knowledge; it was heart knowledge.

You're surrounded with prayer needs. God is asking you to pray. You know prayer works – you've witnessed it more times than you could ever count. You know you're in God's presence, and the Holy Spirit is working powerfully in you and in those around you. But you can't feel a thing. Does anything feel worse than going into intercession and feeling absolutely nothing?

It's happened to me many times. I know God is there and I know He will respond. But I don't feel what I normally feel: God's overwhelming presence, the electricity of prayer, the rush of the Holy Spirit through me... I get spoiled by these powerful signs. When they don't happen, I feel disconnected. But it's not about what I feel. It's about faith in what God is doing. When I don't feel anything in prayer, I go through the motions by faith. I know God will respond. I know He's already working.

After days on a mission trip, when fatigue sets in, when the enemy starts to hit hard, when you're overwhelmed by all you've experienced, it's easy to feel disconnected in the spirit. It's also easy to worry that you're blocking God somehow. If only you'd stayed stronger or sharper. *As if* you could block the work God is doing in that place! Remember, it's never about you. It's always about Him. He just needs you to show up and invite Him in. By faith.

We walked into a church one night, and despite the awesome praise and worship, I couldn't feel a thing. I'd been an intercessor long enough to know that what I did or didn't feel wouldn't stop God from working in this place. He was already working, and He had already made His plans. All He asked was that we move by faith and invite Him in. But I couldn't help it: the doubts started circling.

I was surrounded by people who desperately needed more of God. Why couldn't I be more present? What if I had put a little more effort into recharging earlier in the day? What if I had prayed more before the trip, for moments specifically like this? What if I had dropped to my knees during praise and worship and begged the Holy Spirit to make me feel something? What if I... what if I... what if I – ?

“It's not about you. It's about Me.”

As we got up to walk around the sanctuary, lay hands on people and pray, I said one of the simplest, most powerful prayers I'd ever prayed: “God, get me out of Your way!”

The Lord answered. I watched Him all night. Prayer after prayer. I knew He was getting through – I saw it; I sensed it; I trusted. I felt nothing, but that didn't matter. God was bigger than my weakness. I only had to invite Him in and stand there in faith; He took care of the rest.

The prayer line was nearly over; just a few more people waiting. Though I was still frustrated to feel nothing, I took comfort in the faces I saw in the congregation. It was clear that God had touched many people that night, and that was cause for rejoicing. It didn't matter what I felt or didn't feel – I kept telling myself that. I rejoiced in my spirit and thanked God for His mighty work in this place. I was truly joyful in my spirit, even though I “felt” nothing.

The last woman in line walked over to me. She was elderly; she looked tired, almost as emotionless as I felt. I placed one hand on top of her head, the other on her shoulder, and started to pray.

I prayed for her in the spirit. And I whispered a few words, because I had learned that words bring comfort and conviction, even when you're speaking English and they understand Portuguese; even when you have laryngitis, as I still did.

I didn't know what I was praying for in her situation. I have no doubt the Holy Spirit was trying to guide me, but I couldn't hear Him. I just kept praying, thanking God for all He was doing in her life; letting Him know I trusted Him with her needs; asking Him once again to get me out of His way.

“Minister to her, Jesus. Let her know You're here. Touch her life, touch her heart. Keep her close to You, Lord.”

As I ended the prayer, I lifted her face with my hands. “Bless you,” I whispered through my damaged vocal chords. “God bless you. Jesus loves you so much.”

She opened her eyes. Something was different. Her face had softened... with the love of the Holy Spirit. The light of Jesus filled her eyes.

Looking at me, she raised her hands and gently began to motion. Slowly, with wonder on her face, she showed me how Jesus had reached out His hand to her, filled her with His love and His Spirit, and brought her peace. She felt Jesus holding her close, letting her know how precious she is to Him. The Holy Spirit had overflowed her and was pouring out of her. She told me all of this without saying a word.

Jesus' touch on my face in that moment; a gentle swirl of human emotion, fed by His love; the long-awaited rush of the Holy Spirit right through me; the awesome Presence of a Heavenly Father who loves unconditionally with such deep passion; a restoration of hope, of belonging... everything I had longed to feel since we set foot in that church, I was overcome with it in a single moment. Her face shone with her smile, and I knew she could see nothing but joy on mine. As she hugged me, I felt Jesus' arms around me.

When you're used to the sizzle of the Holy Spirit, it's tough to pray into situations where nothing seems to happen. It's even tougher to go from watching the Holy Spirit set an entire congregation on fire, to a different church on a different night where nothing seems to change. Hang in there; God is working.

I'm reminded of a message one of our associate pastors preached during Advent: "Do not despise the small things."⁴ It's great to see massive transformation, magnificent wonders, awesome signs that God moves mountains. That doesn't mean we shouldn't rejoice in the small things too. Nor do we always know what quiet wonders He is doing in a person's life – and perhaps getting ready to do something mighty!

Just because a person doesn't drop at the foot of the Cross, or run through the aisles shouting, that doesn't mean Jesus didn't reach into their life and save them, or heal them that night. Just because someone slips quietly out the back of the church, that doesn't mean the Holy Spirit hasn't lit a fire in them.

Instead of worrying that nothing is happening, realize God is *always* working. You've invited Him in; so has the pastor and so have the people He's working in, however quiet or unmoved they might appear to be. He was asked, and He has responded. You *know* He has. And He intends to keep going with what He started!

Keep praying in faith – that's exactly what He wants you to do!

⁴ Zechariah 4:10

I loved it when children came to the altar for prayer. Sometimes they had a huge need for healing. Many of the kids struggled with physical and emotional hardship; many came from broken homes; some were terrified, tortured by oppressive spirits that have no business tormenting adults, much less children.

Everyone's demeanor changed when a child came to the prayer line or through a prayer tunnel. It's a strange experience, especially when a child is clearly in pain. You're asking God to break this oppressive spirit, and you're not asking gently; at the same time, you can't help but soften your voice and your touch, as you ask God to pour out His blessings on this precious child, and to help the child grow in peace and in the knowledge and light of Jesus' love.

Praying for children is always an opportunity to ask God to bless their lives. To ask that He give them His protection and His wisdom. That He instruct them in His ways and keep them focused on the path He has set for them, despite the distractions of the world around them. That He fill them with constant awareness of His Presence, so they know they're never alone. That He continue to make Himself known to them as they get older and face challenges and tough decisions.

There was one little girl I'll never forget. She was part of the dance team at one of the churches we visited, and from what I could tell, her father was a leader in the church. All the other girls seemed to have huge healing needs to deal with, and it was clear they were really struggling, grasping for God's peace and mercy through prayer. This little girl wasn't going through a crisis; I could tell she didn't have any concerns heavy on her heart. But as she watched her friends sobbing and fainting and digging their fingers into the splintered wood of the Cross, something started to weigh on her. The Holy Spirit whispered to me and I knew immediately: The little girl felt left out.

"What's wrong with me?" I could almost hear her words as she looked up at her father. "Why can't I find what they've got? Why hasn't Jesus called out to me? Has He forgotten me? Why don't I have a problem to turn over to God?"

My heart broke and I knew: from the moment that grief lodged in her heart, she *did* have a problem. A big one. She needed her Lord and Savior. I looked at her father; his gaze caught mine. He looked down at his daughter, and with his hand on her shoulder, he guided her over to me.

It was one of the most joyous moments of prayer I'd ever known. I felt God pour out His blessings on that little girl. When I finished praying, she gave a smile that said she wasn't certain what just happened, but she felt included. She felt loved.

As she walked away, God left the burden on my heart to pray for her, and to keep praying for her until He says to stop. I'm praying for her still today. I pray that she never knows the crisis and torment that afflicted the other girls, but that she always knows how precious she is to God, and how much she is loved.

7

We set up the eyeglass ministry in the church building and as people came to the feeding line, they were guided in to have their eyes examined. I was the “distance object.” As we did the eye exams, I sat in a chair across from the patient. They looked at my eyes to test different lens strengths for distance vision.

Some observers thought I had a boring job. Not at all! Has an eye chart at the doctor’s office ever smiled at you? Ever put you at ease, bonded with you, let you know you’re important? Has an eye chart ever prayed for you? In some ways, I think I had the most enjoyable job of all.

I referred to my seat as the prayer chair. We all prayed for the patients and for each other as we worked. But because on most days I didn’t have to test lens strength, or worry about crowd control, or fit eyeglasses, I got to focus most on prayer.

As soon as a patient sat down, I started praying, asking the Holy Spirit to guide my prayers for them and minister to their needs. I did this quickly, silently, in the spirit, while I continued to smile with the patient and help Kayla interpret gestures. Once in a while, the Holy Spirit revealed that a person was struggling with an oppressive spirit. In those situations, I sent a silent signal to others on the team: extra prayer needed. A quick nod told me they were jumping in with concentrated prayer for the patient.

I was an interactive, multitasking, praying human eye chart. I felt a bond with each person who sat in front of me. And I had a front row seat to watch the Holy Spirit run the entire operation. What a blessed experience!

As we finished our eyeglass work for the day, Kayla stopped by to look at the eyes of the young woman who showed the growth the day before. *The growth was gone!* Kayla called me over to look, to be sure it really was not there. Sure enough – there was no sign of it. We told Rick. The woman would still need a medical exam to be sure all was well. But it was clear to us: the Ultimate Physician was at work!

Rick had brought about 10 suitcases filled with donated clothing. He does that on every trip. Each member of the team carries a huge suitcase with them from the States. The clothes had to be sorted by size and type, and inventoried. It was too hot to take them up to the Hill, especially with the truck broken – Niles and Kevin were still hard at work, trying to repair the truck. So Edna and I volunteered to spend the afternoon sorting through the clothes to get them ready for the next team that would come to Brazil.

First we had to go across the street to a little kiosk everyone referred to as the local “Home Depot.” We needed large plastic bags for the clothes. While I didn’t know how to speak Portuguese, I understood everything the clerk was asking and saying to us during the transaction. There’s something about shopping in another language. You can almost predict what is going to be said, and somehow the meaning comes across. Though I’ve done it many times in many places, it never ceases to amaze me how much communication is possible, even when a specific language isn’t shared. With our newly purchased plastic bags, we returned to the mission to sort clothing in the all-purpose dining area.

The clothes were very nice. I’d seen people try to donate worn-out clothing before, or clothes that were torn or covered with stains. I was glad Rick accepted much better quality clothing. Sometimes we think that just giving anything is better than nothing. Maybe in extreme cases that is true. But when the recipients are single working moms, they need decent clothing for work. Having been the recipient of donated clothes when I worked as a volunteer in Russia, I understood how important it was that the clothes not be rags.

It seemed strange to be sorting through winter clothes when it was blazing hot in the open-air dining area. It was a relief when clouds moved in and the breeze picked up; things started to cool off a little. Before long, we heard a rumble in the distance. The cloud cover grew darker and the scorching sun disappeared. The trees started to sway, the leaves shook. We barely got the awning lowered before the rain hit.

The pelting rain blew in beneath the awning, but no one complained. It felt great! The lightning and thunder, the rushing wind brought to mind the power of the Holy Spirit, even as the rain spoke of the refreshment given to us by our Heavenly Father. I was starting to feel and even *see* so much more depth to Who He is. He is truly magnificent.

After we finished sorting the clothes, I took the opportunity to sit down with a notebook and write. I hadn't had time to write anything for days; we had been so busy. The Psalm Smoothies were on hold. I was just trying to capture all these new images the Lord had been revealing to me, and I sketched out a few devotionals. It seemed I could write devotionals nonstop for eternity and not run out of images to illustrate them, just by being in this place and watching the Holy Spirit move among the people here.

Craig started doing some line drawings in response to our Bible study lessons. They were amazing and gave me a whole new dimension for seeing the messages God was giving. Again, the Lord was expanding my visual understanding of His Kingdom and feeding my spirit with His inspired images.

Several of the guys on the team were sitting around, drinking *acai*, an Amazon berry drink, enjoying the downtime, joking and letting off steam. One of them apparently noticed I was writing and he told the others, "You know, she's writing every word you're saying. We're all going to end up in a book."

I looked up.

"A book?" I managed to whisper. My voice was starting to come back, little by little. "You think just one book is enough to write about all of you?"

"Uh oh."

I laughed. "Don't worry. I don't want you all to sue me. You'll just end up as characters in a novel some day."

Not really.

But their dialogue became livelier.

That night, we went to the mission church. The place was packed – clearly everyone had made sure to bring a friend, just as they had been asked when I was there a week earlier. *Just a week?* It seemed like eternity had passed since then. I knew from the previous week that the worship would be lively. This time, I really focused on the dance team.

There were several young women on the team, along with a few teens and young girls. It was obvious they were completely caught up in their worship of God, totally submitted to Him. I started to see so much detail in their costumes: the colors, the fabric, the patterns. Everything seemed to sparkle, yet they weren't trying to draw attention to themselves. It was all about displaying God's glory. I could almost see angels dancing around His Throne.

As I watched their faces, I got a further glimpse into the heart of God. I not only felt His love for each of them; I saw it, in every expression, every movement. I knew He was doing awesome things in each of their lives and that no matter what hardships they faced each day, they trusted Him. That it was His awesome pleasure to prove His faithfulness and love in great and powerful ways... and in small and precious ways.

They danced with streamers and sashes. They used banners and pageantry. They carried His Presence so deeply. In that moment of worship, they were consumed by Him.

I knew they were boiling hot in their costumes – everyone in the church was sweating, as the floor fan strained against the heat. But I was so grateful for the sacrifice those girls made, so that our worship experience would be this intense. And they showed me another side of God that I was almost startled to see – our Father's sweet love that a child's heart can understand even in the midst of poverty and oppression. It was so hard to remember they had nothing; because as they danced with the Holy Spirit, they seemed to have everything. They truly saw with Kingdom eyes. They were daughters of the King.

I don't know how well they understood it when they left the church and went back to the hardships of daily life. But in those moments of worship, every girl on the dance team seemed to know what it means to be a treasured daughter of the Most High King. They shared that vision, that understanding with all who were there to worship. I could imagine God was working the same way in their daily lives, saying to them, *"I want so much for you."* And I truly think that deep in their hearts, they believe Him.

Through it all, He kept calling me to dance.

Though my voice was still too weak to sing, I started air drumming. I made up my mind that the next time I visited this church, I'd ask the band if I could play drums along with them for one song. I didn't know enough about drumming yet – I had just started drum lessons a few months before. But next time I would.

Craig tried to convince me I should just play the drums now and let the Holy Spirit lead me. I knew he was right; it could happen. I guess I wasn't ready. Just as I wasn't ready to try dancing, even though it was becoming clearer by the hour that's what God wanted for me. I was still having trouble absorbing that.

I was thrilled when I saw Melanie, one of our teammates who was seeking more of the Holy Spirit, pick up a tambourine decorated with streamers and start shaking it. By that one simple movement of worship, I knew the Holy Spirit was moving her to a deeper relationship with Him. I'm not sure I would have noticed that a week earlier, or appreciated it so much.

Rick got up to give his message in Portuguese. He was quoting from Romans 5:1-2:

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.⁵

He wasn't preaching in English, but I could tell from the way he was acting things out what he was saying: another type of visual movement. It amazed me how God used hand motions and acting to minister to people. Our glorious Creator is truly creative! As I watched and listened, though I couldn't understand the words, God spoke clearly to my heart. He opened a new understanding for me of where joy comes from. When faith brings peace, we rejoice.

The Lord spoke to me of His deep peace, which I knew was something I had yet to experience. We might feel peaceful in some situations, but deep and lasting peace comes only from God, and only by faith. It comes by trusting Him – truly – with everything, with every single part of our heart, and of our spirit; with a total focus on His love and the promise of His Kingdom, no matter what's going on around us. It is from within that place of His deep peace that true joy arises.

⁵ NKJV

As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full.⁶

I've been joyful in my life many times; but not since early childhood had I experienced what I would count as real joy, the kind Jesus talks about in this passage. He speaks of a joy that comes not from human emotion or reaction to worldly inspiration, but from the deep spiritual joy of abiding in the True Vine, and of the True Vine abiding in us.⁷ Of the Lord's pure joy coursing through us, shining in us, overflowing us. Jesus speaks of deep and lasting joy that is not of the world. It is a joy found instead by truly entering God's rest,⁸ and that is done through complete faith in Jesus.

I remembered when Rick first came to Dahlenega on that October weekend, when God called me to go to Brazil. I had argued with Rick that I had joy in my life. In listening in the spirit to his Portuguese sermon on Romans that night at the mission church in Brazil, I knew I hadn't even begun to know what real joy is. I hadn't even reached peace; I didn't understand how to enter God's rest.

I had faith – strong faith in all the things God *could* do in my life. I hadn't stopped to consider or ask what He *would* do, just because of Who He is and how He loves – He “*who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think...*”⁹ That night, the Lord showed me that I needed to strengthen my faith in that area. That's what I prayed for, as I sat in the broiling hot mission church and watched the Holy Spirit move in power through His Word. I wanted to know the peace, the rest, the joy of the Lord that I had only read about in Scripture. I wanted to live it! I wanted Jesus to live it in me.

⁶ John 15:9-11 NKJV

⁷ John 15:1-8

⁸ Hebrews 4:1-2

⁹ Ephesians 3:20 NKJV

When we first walked in the door of the mission church for worship that evening, the Holy Spirit pointed out a particular man to me. I started praying for him during the praise and worship. The Spirit wouldn't let go of me. When we were called into the congregation to pray over people, I didn't rush straight over to him, in case my emotions were getting in the way. I waited for the Holy Spirit; and He led me in a different direction. But I wasn't surprised when I circled around the church, prayed over several people, and there he was in front of me. The Holy Spirit said, "Now."

I started praying with the man, and I could tell he was deep in prayer with me, determined to give his burden to the Lord. Job; money; family; too much uncertainty. I felt the weight on his shoulders. As I lifted his burden to Jesus, our Savior's voice came back to me: "I will help him with every decision."

I nodded.

"Tell him."

I didn't know if he could understand my English, but I told the man, and then I started praying in the spirit, asking God to reach through to him and give him assurance. I told God that whatever else happened that night, I did not want this man to leave here without knowing, in his heart, that he could trust the Lord's guidance for every decision in his life.

I had to let go of him finally; had to move on and trust that Jesus was working in him. Back in my seat, I continued to pray for him, even as I also prayed for Rick and the message, for Pastor Tony and the congregation, and for the Holy Spirit to fill the church to overflowing. A few times during the sermon, I glanced toward the man. He seemed to be listening intently, but I could also see the struggle on his face.

After Rick gave his message, he asked us to form a prayer line at the altar. We offered prayers for salvation, prayers to break the spirit of death, prayers for reconciliation and forgiveness. Then came prayers for finances. The man walked up, came over to me.

I continued my prayers for him: "Lord Jesus, let him know he doesn't have to make these decisions alone. Help him trust You, Lord. This isn't his burden to carry. You have the answers. You will tell him how to decide. All he has to do is ask You and trust You."

I repeated it over and over, in hoarse-sounding English. In between, I prayed in the spirit, asking God to touch this man's heart and strengthen his faith.

Finally I felt it. The enormous weight shattered around us, and the man looked up. The tears streaming down his face glistened with his joy. He was a different person. Younger, freer, ready to trust God and receive His blessings. The Holy Spirit had broken through. *Thank You, Jesus!*

The worship service was over, and the tiny mission church bustled with activity. We got busy setting up for the service projects we needed to do that night: shoe fitting and eyeglass ministry. I was at my vision-testing perch, this time sitting beneath the windows at the back of the church. Because of the crowd, we pulled in a few more team members to help keep order, but how do you tame chaos? It was easy to get frustrated – but easier still to get caught up in the excitement. These people, who had so little, were about to get brand new shoes, and eyeglasses if they needed them.

As I sat there, I was multitasking: praying for each patient; praying for God's strength and calm for the team; helping with our unique eyeglass ministry vocabulary and interpreting gestures; trying to keep patients focused and kids out of the testing area; talking with a few teens who wanted to practice English; watching the church elders "argue" and tease each other about who should get which glasses; and thanking God for the awesome worship, for this incredible mission church, and for the cup of water some kind soul brought me from upstairs.

As my overloaded senses took in everything, I felt transported to a different place and time. The laughter, the excitement, the fellowship... it could have been the church I grew up in, years ago in Miami. The way the mission church community interacted together in lively fellowship, in support and friendship, we could have been at any one of our gatherings in my old church. I could see my childhood friends in the faces of the kids. The laughter, the love on the faces of adults I might have known my entire life.

And yet, they were being fitted for donated shoes and second-hand eyeglasses. In the world, they had nothing. They lived in poverty. But what they had in their hearts shone through in a fellowship so achingly familiar. So awesome.

Our eyeglass team worked until almost midnight, and the place was still lively. I was sick, exhausted, but I didn't want to leave. Surely the Presence of the Lord was in this place. It felt like home.

DANCE IN THE RIVER

8

The eyeglass ministry was always a challenge, but it would have been more so without teamwork. We each had our role, helped each other where we could, worked together to minister to people. We paid attention to everything, so we could fill in for each other if needed. And we continued to invite the Holy Spirit in as the most important member of the team – as our Leader.

On the last day of the eyeglass exams, the Holy Spirit asked me to fill in for Melanie, who had been fitting the glasses, because she needed to rest. Edna had been helping with the shoe fitting but that was over, so I asked her if she would sit in the prayer chair while I prepared to fit glasses. I knew how to do the eyeglass fitting, but since I hadn't actually done it before, I moved awkwardly. We had a crowd that day, and I quickly felt overwhelmed. I sent up a simple prayer: "Help!"

A few minutes later, Cal, who had been working up at the food line, walked in. "The Holy Spirit told me you needed help here."

"Thank you!" ...to the Holy Spirit for sending him, and to Cal for listening and responding.

With two of us doing the job, it went smoothly. My sense of pressure was gone, and I could once again focus on ministering to the patients.

Imagine going to the eye doctor's office, only to discover the office building is gone. A note says that if you want your eyes examined today, a chair is set up for you in the middle of a supermarket aisle. How would you feel, having your eyes examined, being fitted for glasses, while all your friends stand around, watching; kids run by, shouting; strangers walk in and out, looking for what they need, every once in a while glancing over at you or trying to reach around you?

It wasn't easy to set aside an examining space and keep onlookers out of the area. What a tough situation for the patients. They were poor, some of them not in good health, uncertain what the results of the exam would be; they were self-conscious about having their eyes examined and being fitted for glasses in public. They had to depend on someone's donated eyeglasses, so they could see better to do their job or take care of their children.

The glasses weren't the perfect fit. We had no bifocals, no astigmatic lenses. Our patients had to pick from the supply we had. They couldn't choose designer frames or tinted lenses; you might as well forget contacts! And we quickly ran out of the most needed strengths, as well as the smaller glasses for the children. The patients we reached at the end of the trip had to scrape the bottom of the suitcase for whatever glasses were left.

On the last day, I had to fit a pair of huge, clunky, women's glasses on a middle-aged man, and explain through gestures why he either had to take them, or continue to struggle with his vision. There are no easy answers in a situation like this. You have to work with reality and trust God to do the rest.

Seeing the joy of someone able to see clearly for the first time in years; hearing the words of appreciation; seeing how God used the eye exams to minister to each person's spiritual needs... the ministry was a success. With each pair of glasses we fitted, God said to that precious person, "I love you so much that I sent these eyeglasses from the other side of the world, to help you see the beauty in the faces of your loved ones, and to help you with your work." These were some of the most awesome moments of ministry I'd ever experienced.

But I will never forget the man who had to accept the clunky women's frames, or the child who had to walk away without any glasses at all, because there were no kids' glasses left. It was a reminder that what you give counts. If you feel led to give to a ministry like this, don't ever think your gift is too small. God has a purpose for your gift, a very special person picked out to receive this blessing. He will use it to bless their life, and yours.

We had some downtime that afternoon. Lynn and I decided to take a stroll around the neighborhood, since we didn't feel like resting. We walked in a wide circle from the top of the mission, down several blocks, and then back to the bottom of the mission. We passed kids playing soccer on a fenced-in cement patio; it reminded me of street basketball courts in New York City.

Kids everywhere were flying kites – these were a frequent sight whenever we looked out from the mission. We had talked about how, if we had more time to get out in the community, we would start a kite ministry. Go buy a kite and let the kids show us how to fly it. Lynn had already written two devotionals about kites and the Holy Spirit.

She mentioned that you can make a ministry out of almost anything. She had a tiny battery-operated fan that she'd carry around; she'd walk up to a team member that was sweating and click on the fan. People called it the fan ministry, and it made such a difference. It's awesome what God will use.

As we walked down the street toward the bottom of the mission, we saw a cat sitting in front of one of the buildings. We're both cat lovers, so we were thrilled to have our first confirmed cat sighting in Brazil. The place was heavily populated with dogs. Cats seemed to be scarce. As if to confirm the point, when we went inside a little grocery store we saw an aisle full of dog food; at the end of the aisle was a single bag of cat food, presumably for the "customer" down the street.

The store also had an array of the most interesting-looking fruits and vegetables I'd ever seen. We couldn't identify a single one! Of course, the biggest display in the store was the assortment of Halls lozenges that stood behind the checkout counter. I was really coming to appreciate their prevalence.

On the way back to the mission, I decided to stop at a little kiosk and try the *acai* drink everyone was raving about. It was so awesome, I poured bottled water into the empty *acai* cup after I finished and drank the flavored water, to be sure not one speck of the berries was left. I could see where it could be addictive, but I could only afford to try it once. I had almost no offering money left in my wallet, and we still had more churches to visit. I had felt moved to give more of an offering at each church than I had expected. God had a way of continuing to keep *reai* in my wallet; to this day, I don't know how He did it, but there was always enough to give freely.

As we came back to the front gate of the mission, we peeked into the garage and saw truck engine parts still scattered all over the floor. The guys said that with the help of the Holy Spirit, they were getting closer to solving the problem and being ready to negotiate for parts. They had been at it for days, but they knew they could save the mission a lot of money on the truck repair.

I wished we could have spent more time getting to know the people in the community around the mission, yet I understood why we needed to spend so much time in prayer and Bible study and ministry preparation. God was doing wonders among us, taking each one of us through incredible spiritual growth. I knew there would be other times, other places for interacting with people in communities. This was a time of ministry preparation.

I also knew very clearly by now that my writing ministry would be changing and I would be moving in a new direction. God made it clear He wanted my ministry off the Internet and live, on the ground. He was starting to give me glimpses of what was to come. I was trying very hard to let Him guide me in this new direction, but I admit I kept filtering His vision through my own understanding. I guess I still hadn't shut off my brain completely. That time would come soon enough. God had the plan.

That afternoon, we had a couple hours for group prayer. My way of praying had changed significantly. I wasn't just feeling my prayers anymore. I was seeing color, movement, in so many dimensions. I knew it wasn't from the antihistamines I was taking. All of my focus on dancing and streamers and being a daughter of the King... it was changing me dramatically on the inside.

Edna and I talked about dancing and worship colors. This led into talk about colors of clothing, something I hadn't thought about in years. I had worked in corporate New York City, where everything was black and tough. With all the stress leading up to this trip, I hadn't bothered to find anything but the most practical clothes that fit the dress code. Colors had been the last thing on my mind, and I hadn't begun to ask my *heart* how it felt.

I knew things were about to change when Edna handed me a pair of pink earrings to wear to the worship service that night. I looked at them, and strong images of my early childhood flashed back. All I could think of was how much I missed things.

Missed what?

I couldn't figure it out, but clearly my life had a huge emptiness, and God was bringing it to the surface. Here I was, a grown woman, a former corporate New Yorker, toughened by trauma and by life. Suddenly everything around me was pink and glittery and childlike. *What was this?* In the middle of it all, there was God, encouraging me:

“Wear the pink earrings. Dance with Me.”

I had no bearings for this!

It seemed God wanted it that way.

The next day our team took a sightseeing trip around Rio, and we went up the mountain to see the Christ the Redeemer statue. In the afternoon we went by the shopping mall. I would rather have been in a church praying with people, but even God rested on the seventh day, so I accepted the idea of just taking it easy.

Besides, my throat was hurting terribly. I was getting my voice back, but I still felt like I had a knife in my throat, and the pain just wouldn't quit. I figured one of the mall drug stores would have something to make my throat numb, or at the very least I could restock my supply of Halls.

I walked around the mall with Lynn and Craig. We were going in and out of stores, just trying to kill time and relax. We ended up in a stationery store when Lynn, who had caught onto the “pink” thing that God was doing with me, said, “Look, Janet! A pink notebook!”

I had to admit, all the pink stuff was starting to have an appeal. I was seeing it everywhere.

I walked over to look closely and saw a whole shelf of kids' notebooks and folders. Right in front of me, this little notebook seemed to glitter off the shelf. Hello Kitty! It was pink and glittery, and the kitty on the cover was wearing a gold crown and dancing in a colorful dress. I think I screamed.

When Lynn saw it, she needed no explanation. I opened up the little notebook, and inside were these pink pages decorated with colorful, glittery drawings of beads and stars and gems all around the outside edges. The notebook had pages of stickers too!

I could hear the smile in Abba's voice as He spoke, "*This is for your Bible study notes. Get a pen too.*"

The notebook wasn't cheap. It was obviously imported and very popular and I didn't have much of my offering money left. But there was no way I was going to miss this blessing. The clerk spoke some English and she followed me all the way to the register, making sure I looked at every Hello Kitty item in the store. Finally I settled on a big pink pen with Hello Kitty on the cap.

As I watched the clerk ring up the pen and notebook, every cell in my body was bubbling with smiles and laughter. I didn't know when was the last time I had felt this way... if ever! Was this what it felt like to let yourself be truly loved by the King?

At the next worship service, I couldn't help but pray for every woman – that she would know, without a doubt, she is a precious and beloved daughter of the Most High King.

We always took the mission bus to the evening church services. We were usually running late because of traffic. Our bus driver, Paulo, made a valiant effort; driving on Rio highways cannot be considered easy. So we would usually pull up to a church after the praise and worship started. Rick would rush us off the bus and lead us up to our seats at the front of the church.

This time was different.

We pulled up in front of a church that didn't quite look like a church. From the outside, it looked almost like a café, with glass walls along the sidewalk. Through the bus windows, we could see lively praise and worship going on inside, arms waving in the air, people dancing around. People were streaming in from the sidewalk, crowding through the entrance. Way up at the front was a large cross.

As we prepared to get off the bus, Rick stood at the door and turned to face us. He just stood there, and that alone was unusual. So was the look on his face. He started to speak, and hesitated. He raised his hand. “There’s something I need to tell you about this church.”

I couldn’t imagine what could be wrong. We had looked forward to this church, heard a lot about the pastor, how he had come from a church in a tough neighborhood where God had moved in a mighty way. I couldn’t wait to see what God was doing here. Why were we waiting on the bus?

Finally Rick shook his head and lowered his hand. “I’ll tell you later.” He turned and got off the bus.

Edna told me later she started praying like crazy, because she thought maybe terrorists were surrounding the building. It turned out she was right, in a way. She did need to pray – we all did. And there were terrorists surrounding the place – but not the kind she was thinking of. They were not of this world.

We followed Rick off the bus. I stopped to take a picture through the glass wall. It would be the only picture I would take of this church.

It hit me the instant I walked through the door, like a blow to the chest. It nearly knocked me off my feet. I couldn’t breathe. I felt like hands were choking me and a vice squeezed my ribcage. Within seconds, I was fighting violent tears that threatened to explode. My whole body wanted to cry out and convulse and sob hysterically, all at the same time. Angry. I felt so angry.

I knew what it was. I had felt it before. We were in the presence of some very dark spirits.

No one else seemed to react, and I was fighting so hard not to. I didn’t want to show what I was feeling; wasn’t sure I could if I tried. I felt paralyzed. It was so hard to walk to the front of the church, as if my feet were metal and the ground was a giant magnet. Somehow I made it to my seat, tried not to show my hysteria and fought the urge to run screaming from the building.

Jesus, help me. I don’t want to be here. God, please help us. Cover us. Please.

I started praying in the spirit; I wasn't about to stop. Praise and worship ended and Rick sent us out into the congregation to lay hands on people. It was like praying into concrete. It wasn't the people – they had hands raised; some were brought to tears; they wanted to receive. Clearly they couldn't. I just kept pleading with the Holy Spirit and tried not to panic. It brought back bad memories, and the hands on my throat grew tighter.

Jesus, help us! Help them!

We hadn't been praying long when Rick called us back to the front. I don't remember what he said. I could hardly process it at the time but it was clear he was distressed. He kept saying he wanted to leave. He told us to start praying for him, for the church. By this time everyone sensed something was wrong. We were all praying like crazy.

“Pray!” he shouted in English. “You need to pray, pray.”

We are, Rick! We are!

I wanted so badly to scream – not that I could have with my laryngitis, but there was too much inside me, so much turmoil I could hardly stand it. I thought for sure I would blow up; how could I not?

Rick called us up to the front. Surely he wasn't doing an altar call. Instead, he called the entire congregation to the front and told them to go down the line and give each of us a hug. He had them repeating out loud, “I love my church, I love my church.” I realized he was doing anything to get through to them, just a toehold – *anything*. Such warm hugs, such beautiful smiles, such genuine people.

Such horrific oppression.

They went back to their seats and so did we. Rick started to preach. I could feel it – the place was falling. Not that we had a grip to begin with, but we were definitely losing it. I just wanted to feel the Holy Spirit inside of me, just a flicker of His presence. I could do warfare with no feeling, just by faith, but dear God in heaven, I needed to feel something here. This was too big. This was an entire congregation. The pastor looked devastated, so weighed down. I cried as I started praying silently for him. I couldn't stand this feeling.

Rick was talking in Portuguese to the congregation and in English to us, seemingly at the same time. “Pray for me. Pray for them. This is life and death. The enemy is all over this place. We're going to lose this church.”

That was an understatement.

Again Rick said he wanted to leave. This time something was starting to shift in me, at least in my mind. *No. No. I do not want to leave. This darkness will not stand.* Rick stopped preaching and I thought maybe he was going to ask us to go. Instead he called Edna up to dance.

Thank You, merciful Father.

We prayed like crazy for her. The congregation didn't break but in the middle of the dance, we did. I felt the Holy Spirit rush right through us, right down the row. *Finally!* The hands on my throat were gone. The weight was off of me. I could breathe again.

Thank You, God. Thank You, Jesus!

Now, it was time to reverse this thing. It was time for the Holy Spirit to kick butt.

Things moved so quickly after that, or seemed to. It was like flying in fast forward. We were up, we were down, we were all over the place. In reality, it took hours – four hours – just chiseling away at the darkness by prayer. Destroying it one piece at a time, with the sure knowledge that Jesus had already destroyed it completely, and He would bring freedom here tonight. The transformation would be huge. We knew it! No one would miss the mighty act of God that was about to happen.

We kept praying and praying. Prayer tunnels, altar calls, walking around and laying hands. At one point Rick called us up to the front. We lined up, shoulder to shoulder in front of the Cross, pointed out toward the congregation and screamed at the top of our lungs, screamed at the devil to flee. He would *not* take this church! They would have freedom! Somehow I screamed too, even with laryngitis. The sound I heard coming from me could only have come from the Spirit of God.

Quickly Rick called everyone into a prayer tunnel. People were falling in the middle, on top of each other, with more rushing in. It happened so fast we had to lay people in between the rows of chairs so others could get through. I was at the tunnel entrance with Pastor Tony. We reached a point where the instant Tony touched someone on the forehead they fell. People were stepping over others, just to have their turn to be zapped by the Holy Spirit at the tunnel entrance.

When the last person dropped at the entrance to the prayer tunnel, I turned and looked toward the congregation. People were dazed, drained, exhausted, but the darkness had lifted; in fact it was gone. People were still trying to get their bearings, but they were free! The Light was everywhere. I could hardly stay on my feet. I don't know that I'd ever experienced such relief and such incredible awe for the fierceness of God and how mighty He is to save.

If you don't truly understand the breadth of the righteousness God gives us, or the depth of His gift of Salvation, and how much He *wants* to save us, watch Him come rushing through a tunnel of prayer and shatter everything *for just one soul*.¹⁰ Our God is mighty to save. And our God is eternal Love.

All I could do was stand in awe of what I had just witnessed. For the first time in my life, I truly understood that God will drop everything to go after *one lost soul*, one precious life that He created.¹¹ When that person surrenders to Him, and He takes them into His arms, all of heaven rejoices!

Finally we came back up to the front of the church, and Rick opened the altar for anyone seeking the baptism of the Holy Spirit. I think the entire congregation came forward and fell to their knees. We walked around and prayed. Though the dark spirits were gone, there was still so much bondage to fear and doubt, to self-condemnation that had to be broken, and God was working so quickly to heal. We walked from one person to the next and prayed, so that by some supernatural means each of us had a chance to pray for every person there.

When everyone in the congregation had returned to their seats, Rick called up the pastor. The man was alive with an incredible joy. I could *see* the light of Jesus shining in his face. The oppressive weight was gone. He was free, and nothing was going to take that freedom from him. As Craig said in that moment, "This pastor's got a brand new church." I looked out at the congregation, and although it was late at night, the place shone like the brightness of daylight, filled with the glory of God, bursting with the light of His love for His people.

¹⁰ Read II Peter 3:9 – then read it again; and again; and again.

¹¹ Luke 15:4-7 – read it... and believe it!

The praise band started to play, and we were carried up in a River of genuine worship and thanksgiving. People were truly rejoicing and celebrating as if they would never be able to stop. Kayla had made ribbon streamers and brought two to every church to use in worship and then leave behind for the congregation. As we celebrated, she ran and grabbed the streamers and looked as if she wanted to share one of them with us. Without having to think, I reached out my hand and she gave me the streamer. I started dancing like crazy across the front of the church, waving the streamer over my head. Nothing was going to stop me. I *had* to worship the Lord!

A year later, we were blessed with an update on this church, as one of our friends from Dahlonga UMC went on the February mission trip to Brazil. When he returned, he told us that one of the most Spirit-filled places they visited was this very church. The congregation was on fire with the Holy Spirit. They fed deeply on the Word and they rejoiced wildly in their freedom in Christ. The light of His freedom shone on their faces. The pastor walked around during the worship service, shouting God's glory and throwing holy water on everyone!

God took that church for His Kingdom, and no one can take it out of His hand.

9

One of our tasks was to expand the reach of the mission clinic. The Holy Spirit told Rick to send the mission staff out to the Hill to sign up 100 families and give them clinic vouchers. We went with the staff – not that we could do anything to help, given the language barrier; but Rick wanted us to see what God was doing there. And this gave us an opportunity to lay hands on people there and pray for them.

We spent a broiling hot Saturday afternoon on the Hill. We split up into three teams. I joined the team led by Eduardo. It was amazing to see him work with the people on the Hill – and to see the way the Holy Spirit worked through him.

The Hill couldn't have been more than a few miles from the mission clinic, and the clinic was very affordable, even for the working poor in this community. But most of the people on the Hill didn't seem to know the clinic was there or available to them.

By the end of the day, that had changed. We signed up around 160 individuals with vouchers for a free first visit to the clinic and an invitation to worship at the mission church.

The Holy Spirit had a job to do... and He did it.

I had heard about the Hill on one of the first days we were at the mission. We were working late one afternoon. Someone came in, grabbed two people and said, “Let’s go. Rick wants to take food to a family on the Hill.” They were starving, we later learned. This reminded me of all the times I’d seen a church community come together to help a family in crisis. It’s incredible to see God work in this way, more so in a place like this. The mission and church have little, the community even less, with each family barely holding on.

I’ve spent time in poor communities all over the world – including right here in the States. When people visit a poor community for the first time, they are struck by the living conditions. They take in every detail, trying to understand what it would be like to live there. They often make assumptions, projecting their own experience and emotions onto the environment.

I’ve lived in those conditions. I don’t have to imagine what it would be like. I filter out the surface details. What I look for are signs of real community. Do neighbors support each other? Do they have moments where they sit together, share with each other and laugh? How do they respond to a crisis among them? How do the individual personalities fit together in fellowship?

Perhaps my only frustration on this trip was that I had no opportunity to find these answers. I was not living among these people on the Hill, getting to know them, as I had on previous trips overseas. I didn’t speak the language. All I could do was observe for the hour we climbed up and down the hillside and stopped at a few homes. I wanted more. Sure enough, God had more for me – just not in the way I was used to. I had learned plenty about physical communities. He wanted me to learn about spiritual community.

It was strange, climbing up and down dirt paths in the blazing sunlight, stopping in front of tiny dwellings made of baked-brick blocks. The family would come out onto the porch and listen, as Eduardo explained about the clinic and the church.

We often saw looks of pleasant surprise. “That’s a really good thing!” we could almost hear them saying, and we hoped they would show up at the church and become involved. Others were skeptical – we didn’t need to understand a word of the language to know when someone was looking for the catch.

Without thinking, I started praying for conviction – that they would understand that only God could take care of their situation; that He had plans for them that did not include being weighed down by skepticism and fear; that the mission church community would help lift their spiritual burdens to Jesus and nurture them in their spiritual growth. That’s when I saw what God was doing there and started to understand the importance of spiritual community.

In my flesh, I was frustrated that I couldn’t speak the language or spend time living on the Hill, getting to know these people. The Holy Spirit said, “Don’t worry about that right now. Start praying!” I realized it didn’t matter what I knew about a family’s daily life. The Lord knew how they lived, how they interacted, how they supported each other. He would tell me what I needed to know. More importantly, He would guide my prayers to the heart of what they needed most.

If I knew more about how a family or community lived, what would that have accomplished in that moment? I might be comforted; I might be angry; I might exchange sorrow, laughter, frustration with them. I’d done all of that, many times before, in poor communities just like this one. It’s an awesome experience, an important part of fellowship, and I will do it again in a heartbeat. But that’s about human emotion. What about the spirit?

Having to move from one dwelling to the next, stopping to pray for needs I knew nothing about in the natural... I had to trust the Holy Spirit. I had to believe that when I walked away, I could continue to pray for them, my brothers and sisters. That we were all one family, connected through the Holy Spirit. I needed to stay aware of that connection.

As an intercessor, I’ve prayed many times for the needs of people I don’t know personally. I’ve prayed for communities at home and overseas; for churches I’ve never visited; for whatever needs the Holy Spirit puts on my heart, and for others’ needs that I only experience in the spirit. That day on the Hill, I finally understood this kind of connection as spiritual fellowship. Both types of fellowship – face-to-face and spiritual – are critical in building God’s Kingdom.

My heart went out to her the moment I saw her. I recognized her, because I saw myself in her. She was alone – surrounded by caring people, but alone. Battered by illness and only God knew what else. Poverty, for one thing. I didn't see how it was possible to fit inside her kitchen, much less prepare a meal there. And with what food? From where?

She wondered if the damaged bricks in her front wall could be replaced. The gunshot holes went all the way through. She was exhausted, worn out by life; unhappy in her existence, but in no way ready to give up. I had been there. In some ways, I was still there.

Thus began the battle between mind and spirit.

God, get her out of this place! Heal her from this disease that's eating away at her! Restore her strength! Who is responsible for keeping her in poverty and illness? How did she end up in this place? God, I feel like my hands are tied. I need to find an activist group. I need to storm a government office and start wringing some –

“Daughter. You told Me you trusted Me.”

I do trust You, Father. You know I do.

“Then pray for her as I tell you.”

He was right. Of course. He's always right. He knows and wants what's best for us. She was sick, yes. Exhausted. Living an unfair existence. I could have kicked and screamed, as I had done for so many years as an activist. It wouldn't have helped her; it wouldn't have helped me. We'd have continued in our mutual misery, further away from surrendering everything in our hearts to God.

I could have done what my human heart so badly wanted me to do: Put my hands on her and pray for a miracle healing. I would have prayed in total belief, because of all the healing miracles I'd witnessed, including my own. I believe if I had done that in total faith, the Lord would have healed her illness. But it wouldn't have brought her where He wanted her to be.

This wasn't about what I wanted to pray for her. It was about what He needed me to pray. He needed her to know He would stick around; that she could depend utterly on Him; that He alone would renew her strength – she had to *believe* that! He needed her to get into the mission church, where her faith would be nurtured; where she would grow closer to Him. He needed her to trust Him.

That's what I began to pray.

It wasn't easy. My mind shouted: *She needs to know she is strong!* My spirit whispered: *Let her know her strength comes from You, Lord.* I clenched my fists with the need to send illness out of her body, but I gave that need to God. The Holy Spirit placed my hand on her shoulder, away from the physical damage. Out of me poured prayers not of physical healing, but of her need to trust in God to stick with her; to bring new life; to provide everything she needed; to be her strength.

And I left her place, believing He would get through.

When we pray as we want, something changes.

When we pray as God wants, everything changes.

We stopped by the house of a working mom. It was Saturday, so she was there with her children, relaxing – in a tiny baked-brick hut. Those are the kinds of details you notice with your senses, with your human emotions: the walls falling down, the lack of possessions, the kids dressed in rags, the cesspool that separates her home from her neighbor's, the ever-present illness visible in her eyes, in the way she stands, in the way she tries to smile.

All of this was clear. I'd seen it, lived it too many times before. But my spirit saw something different, something God wanted me to see, to pray for. This precious daughter of His didn't think she could succeed in the career that would have lifted her out of this place. It wasn't poverty that stopped her. It was an insecurity that ran deep into her roots. I don't think she was aware. God wanted to make her aware.

Social action, community nurturing – these are so important. I worked for years as an activist focused on community building. I've experienced the miracles of Christian fellowship in my own life. I would never deny the importance of active community ministry. It is vital, and God calls us to it!

But we can't let our desire for action eclipse our focus on prayer. Prayer is action! Without prayer, all other action is limited at best; at worst, it's counterproductive. I know. I was guilty of forgetting this for too long.

If we're not letting God tell us, through prayer, what He wants for a person, for a community; if we don't step out of His way so He can make His will come to be in their lives; we are spinning our wheels, however good our intentions. Community action is awesome and so much in need. But it must come from God. Step one is prayer: the prayers *He* leads us to pray. Then we act... as *He* leads.

In my flesh, I wanted this young working mom to have her health restored; to have a nicer home where she could truly relax with her family on the weekend. In my spirit, I knew God wanted *so much more* for her. He wanted to attack the core of what was strangling her life.

All other needs would be met, if He could get deeper into her life and address that core need. My prayer was that she would trust Him – and get into the mission church community, where her faith could be nurtured and that spiritual bondage broken, as well as more practical daily needs met.

That evening, the mission church was holding their street ministry gathering a few blocks from the mission. We were all invited to attend, and went to give our support. I had been looking forward to this since I'd first heard about it, during my first worship service at the mission – eons ago. I couldn't wait to see what it would be like.

It didn't look like much at first. A few people loitering on the street corner outside a grocery store overflowing with odd-looking fruit and a crate filled with dog food – no cat food at this store. The praise band was setting up on the opposite sidewalk. Microphones were draped across drumheads; speakers were tested and cranked to explosion mode.

Someone walked by and thrust a stack of church flyers into my hand. I was starting to get the hang of Portuguese, and with the help of the cartoon drawings, I figured out that the flyers depicted excuses for not getting to know Jesus: “Too tired,” “Too busy,” “Too depressed.”

“Why are they giving these to us?” I asked Craig. “This is their church. They need to be handing out flyers themselves.”

My excuse wasn't written on the flyer, but that's what it was: an excuse. The truth was that street ministry was way outside my comfort zone. I had no problem taking on Satan's cronies, screaming with laryngitis in the church God rescued. But walking up to a vehicle at a stoplight and thrusting a pamphlet through the car window... not my scene.

“Look, they get it,” Craig said, as he pointed at Pastor Tony's kids chasing down pedestrians and handing them flyers.

Good. And if someone had me doing this at their age, maybe I'd get it too. Yes. Another excuse.

I thought back to a discussion we had one evening in our church community group back home in Dahlonga. “People have different ways of witnessing... in general, and in the moment. God calls each of us in our unique ways.”

That became clear as the evening wore on. Each of us seemed to find the niche God opened for us in that moment. Our primary role, after all, was to create and draw a crowd, so the mission church members could minister to them. We took up stations in different places. Some went to hand out pamphlets at a café down the street. The rest spread out along the sidewalks and started getting into the praise music.

At last, I found my place. Farther up the side street, people had come out of their homes. They sat in front of their houses or stood at the edge of the street, watching and listening from a safe distance. I started to pray for them. I felt the Holy Spirit leading me up the street – not to bother them or make them self-conscious or scare them off. Just to let them see it was okay to participate at a distance.

I stood at the edge of the street, halfway up the long block, and started dancing and clapping to the music, stopping and raising my hands in prayer whenever a worship leader grabbed a microphone and shouted out to God. Imagine my joy when I noticed some of the people edging closer.

When the praise and worship were over, we were called back to the intersection, where we formed a prayer line. It was awesome to see people coming in off the street and off buses to receive prayer. As Jesus ministered to the crowd through us, I noticed the Holy Spirit reached out to those farther up the street and brought them down to the prayer line, where they too could receive prayers for salvation, healing and peace.

God had worked through my reluctance and found a place for me.

No matter where you are now, God has a place for you in all that He does to build His Kingdom. Does that mean you shouldn't continue to grow, to reach out of your comfort zone? Of course not. Every day, I ask Him to keep growing me. But while each of us is growing, He will find a way to use us in every moment... if we just let Him.

It was late evening. The street ministry was over and we were walking back to the mission. We passed the corner grocery store and a few kiosks that were closed; walked past the noise of a café and bar. The canopy of tree branches was dense overhead, pressing the darkness in around us. The humidity was thick, and the breeze was dead. The streets seemed overly narrow, the sidewalks broken and too crowded for this late hour.

Rick decided to treat us all to ice cream, so we stopped at a little sidewalk shop. I ordered a small dish of coconut and pistachio. This brought back more memories of childhood, spending summer evenings sitting on the front porch, enjoying a dish of ice cream, visiting with neighbors who walked by.

That simple, relaxing time of fellowshiping with God and each other had become a distant and painful dream for me, as I lived through the harsh world of corporate New York. The enemy's lies had defined my life... slowly, over time, so that I didn't realize what was happening to me.

After so many years of those lies, I had come to truly believe I was not allowed to relax or enjoy anything; that I owed it to the entire world to sacrifice all of myself on the world's behalf. Somewhere along the way, I had lost my understanding that I didn't owe the world anything. I owed God everything. Though He calls us to lay down our lives for each other, we must do that not out of a false sense of obligation, but by the power of His love working through us. And it's not the old lie-filled life we lay down; it's the new life we allow Him to give us, by that same power of His love.

During all those years of struggle and trauma, God wanted so much more for me than I'd allowed myself to believe. I didn't dare "risk" believing it. I was too scared, deep in my heart; too scared to hope that a love as deep as His could be real – too scared even to allow myself to hope. But His love IS real, and He never stopped pursuing me. He wanted me to indulge in His presence – *above all else*. To just enjoy Him and get lost in Him.

And while He wanted me to continue in ministry and service to Him, He wanted me to do this by putting Him first. If I would only let myself get lost in His love, He would open up opportunities to share His love with others; He would tell me where, when and how to minister. I could only truly see Him in others, and love them with His love, if I were looking at Him and trusting Him for everything in my heart.

With my mind, I was slowly beginning to understand all of this. Unfortunately, my *heart* wasn't getting the message. Why couldn't my heart just let go, and accept where He was leading me?

During this short time in Brazil, God had done such amazing work in my life that I could see the discrepancy so clearly. I could see that I wasn't where He wanted me to be. What He was describing to me was a place of total surrender – not just submitting myself to Him, as I had already done; but *total* surrender in the depths of my heart, to experience the joy of His presence. He was showing me a new way to live – to *really* live.

That place seemed so far away. How was I supposed to get there? It seemed impossible. Of course, He is the God of the impossible. But why couldn't I see the way there? Why couldn't I figure it out? *And why couldn't I shut off my brain and just let Him take me there?*

By the time we got back to the mission, I was tied up in knots.

"I'm going outside to pray," I told Edna.

I had to. I couldn't go on like this. I told her not to worry about me, that I would stay outside as long as I needed to, even if it was all night. "I will keep praying until something changes. I need an answer."

She understood.

I went outside to the terraced steps, walked over to the wall and sat in the dark, much as I had the first two nights when I was at the mission alone. This was much worse. I couldn't think. I couldn't feel. I couldn't pray. I didn't know what was wrong with me. I'd never felt like this in my life. Unable to pray – *at all*. Not even a prayer of helplessness. Just nothing. Nothing to ask. Nothing to say. Nothing left inside of me.

I sat there staring at nothing. Empty. Too numb even to feel miserable.

I don't know how much time passed that way. Finally I couldn't stand it any longer.

God! I gritted my teeth. If You want me to move forward in my life at all, You have got to send someone out here right now with some answers, and I mean right now, because I'm about to lose my mind!

I had never talked to God that way. I knew He could handle it. And I knew He did not bring me all this way to see me stuck in this empty moment of deadness forever.

The floodlights came on above me. I heard the sound of flip-flops coming down the steps. I wasn't really surprised He had answered my prayer so quickly and sent someone out. He had a way of doing that. But I didn't expect Him to send Betty. I hadn't spent much time talking with her, so I figured she didn't know much about me. It turned out she knew way more than I expected. God had been talking even when I hadn't.

We spoke briefly about how I felt, and about the concerns I had that were starting to draw my attention away from the mission. God was already asking me to make so many changes with my ministry back home that it seemed overwhelming, aside from whatever had me tied up in knots tonight.

Betty said, "He's telling me right now that He's going ahead of you and will take care of everything He's asked you to do when you get home. He asks if you will trust Him enough to keep your focus here for a few more days. He still has so much to bless you with."

It seemed crazy that someone was telling me to trust God, mediating between God and me, speaking my prayers for me. I was supposed to be a warrior. How did I end up like this?

But whatever this wall was that was blocking my listening, it opened a crack and I could finally hear Him again. His voice didn't sound the way it normally did, but I recognized Him. I still didn't feel His presence. I never thought I could be comforted without feeling His Spirit, but somehow I did take comfort in it. Perhaps I was experiencing real faith for the first time.

God said to me in a very quiet voice, "*This is brokenness, Daughter. And it's okay. It's where I need you to be. I am with you. Trust in Me.*"

I had to trust Him. I couldn't think, run or pray my way out of this. If I moved forward now, it wouldn't be up to me, in any way. For the first time in my life, I knew what it was to be utterly dependent on God – not for a meal, or a paycheck, or a home, or any number of other needs He had always met; but for the very ability to take a step forward out of this overwhelming nothingness.

I could tell that Betty wanted to pray for more than she did; that God wanted so much more. But I wasn't ready to receive more. She prayed for me to have peace so I could sleep that night.

I thank God for that prayer.

It was a place of utter darkness.

I felt alone.

Yet I wasn't alone. I was aware of a frightening presence.

They were moving everywhere. Circling around me. Pushing me toward a chasm that fell into black nothingness. An abyss with no end.

As I stood at the edge, my mind a mess of confusion, I heard a voice: "God doesn't love you. He loves only His Son. You are nothing to Him. Only Jesus is saved."

A shove, and I was falling. The blackness engulfed me.

There was no way out; nothing to hold onto; just the piercing laughter that bounced off the nothingness around me and the emptiness within me. I couldn't feel terror. I couldn't feel anything.

I kept falling.

They came out of nowhere. A hideous presence. In an instant they were all over me.

Tearing at me.

Screeching.

They pushed – hard. Sent me tumbling across the width of the abyss. My body crashed against something.

I screamed.

Edna woke me.

She didn't have to say a word; the look in her eyes said it all. She was shaking. So was I.

“Was it an attack?” she whispered. “Spiritual? It just helps me to know.”

“It happens sometimes,” I said.

Never this bad. Never like this.

I knew I had about a five-second window to fall back asleep.

The window slammed shut.

I waited until I knew Edna was back in bed. There was no point in dragging her into this. I hoped I hadn’t screamed loud enough or hit the wall hard enough to wake anyone else.

Finally I sat up in bed, still shaking. I stared into the darkness of the room. The nothingness in my soul stared back at me.

I didn’t know what to do.

The words came from my spirit. I reached out my hand in the darkness and whispered, “Jesus, help me. I can’t feel You but I know You’re here. And I trust You. I have nothing left, Lord. *Nothing*. Please let me be Yours. *Completely* Yours. Lord Jesus, I surrender every part of me to You.”

10

The moment I surrendered all of myself to God from that place of total blackness, I heard His voice softly: “*Daughter, I am here. I want you to learn My ways*”. Then He spoke to my heart: *Psalm 103*. I picked up my Bible, stumbled into the bathroom and turned on the light. I read the Psalm over and over. It was all I could pray:

*Bless the LORD, O my soul;
And all that is within me, bless His holy name!
Bless the LORD, O my soul,
And forget not all His benefits:
Who forgives all your iniquities,
Who heals all your diseases,
Who redeems your life from destruction,
Who crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies,
Who satisfies your mouth with good things,
So that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.*

*The LORD executes righteousness
And justice for all who are oppressed.
He made known His ways to Moses,
His acts to the children of Israel.*

*The LORD is merciful and gracious,
Slow to anger, and abounding in mercy.
He will not always strive with us,
Nor will He keep His anger forever.
He has not dealt with us according to our sins,
Nor punished us according to our iniquities.*

*For as the heavens are high above the earth,
So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him;
As far as the east is from the west,
So far has He removed our transgressions from us.
As a father pities his children,
So the LORD pities those who fear Him.
For He knows our frame;
He remembers that we are dust.*

*As for man, his days are like grass;
As a flower of the field, so he flourishes.
For the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
And its place remembers it no more.
But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting
On those who fear Him,
And His righteousness to children's children,
To such as keep His covenant,
And to those who remember His commandments to do them.*

*The LORD has established His throne in heaven,
And His Kingdom rules over all.*

*Bless the LORD, you His angels,
Who excel in strength, who do His word,
Heeding the voice of His word.*

*Bless the LORD, all you His hosts,
You ministers of His, who do His pleasure.*

*Bless the LORD, all His works,
In all places of His dominion.*

Bless the LORD, O my soul!¹²

I skipped breakfast the next morning and sat outside, re-reading the Psalm. Edna went to Rick and Betty and told them what happened. Betty came out to pray with me again.

“I don’t understand this,” I said. “I’m submitted to God. Why do I keep getting attacked? *How much stronger do I need to get?*”

“You don’t need to get stronger,” she said. “You need to get weaker.”

When those words hit, a heavy chain fell off of me. Finally I saw it: how much I had been working in my own strength, even when I thought I was depending on God. My striving was so ingrained it had been invisible to me.

I realized I’d been operating on a promise I made to God years before, to fight His battles to the ends of the earth. But He never asked me to fight those battles – battles He’d already won. Patiently He’d waited, until I had battled myself into such a mess that I had to give up everything to Him. That began a few years earlier, when I realized my overwhelming need for Him. I didn’t know at the time that He was just getting started with me.

In one of our Bible study sessions, Betty had talked about feeling sorry for people that have many gifts, because it’s hard for them to see how much they rely on their own strength; it’s so easy for them to do so many things that they don’t realize how much they are bringing of themselves into each task God gives them. She said it’s easier for someone who walks into the church off the street, under the power of conviction, and gives themselves to God for the first time to let Him move in power in their lives. The gifted people have to let God break them utterly, so He can work effectively in their lives, and through them.

¹² NKJV

I told her, “You know those people you said you feel sorry for? The ones with all the gifts? I’m one of them.”

I didn’t realize how much I was still using my own resources to do every single task God gave me – along with all the tasks He never gave me, things I burdened myself with. I had already given my life to Him, and I was yielding to His will; but I wasn’t yielding to *Him*. Because of that, I was missing all that He intended for me. I didn’t want to miss it any longer. I *had* to walk in total surrender. I wanted that more than anything. But how?

Betty said, “The world’s ways for you are not God’s ways. The rules the world has set for you are not God’s rules.”

As those words sunk in, I was stunned at the revelation. I had *never* understood that before. Never even heard it spoken – not like that. Although the message is plainly written all through His Word, in so many places, in so many ways, I had never *heard* it.

I heard it now, for the first time, as truth. I heard it with my mind. I needed God to get it into my heart.

I started talking with Him.

Lord, I don’t understand what’s wrong. You know I’ve surrendered my life to You.

“Yes, Daughter. You have. No one would dispute that. You trust Me with your life, your health, your finances, your work. You’d walk off a cliff if I asked you to, and you’d trust Me to catch you. But there’s one thing you haven’t surrendered, and that’s the one thing I want most from you, Daughter. I want you to trust Me with your heart.”

My heart?

Fear started to creep over me. I began to shiver deep inside. I knew He had struck the core. And for the first time, I understood why I felt so scared.

All this time, I thought I’d been willing for God to bring me completely to brokenness.

But to break my heart...

“Yes, Daughter. Your heart. The one you keep locked away. That’s what I want from you. Give your heart to Me and trust Me with it. You think you’ve protected it, but you haven’t. It’s smashed to pieces, smothered in bandages, blocked in by walls.”

The truth was almost too much to hear. But He knew I could take it. He knew I was ready... because of the work He had already done in me; because of His Holy Spirit living in me.

“Daughter, let Me take those walls down for you. Then let Me break your heart completely, and give you a shining new one – a heart that overflows with My love; with belief in My eternal love for you.”

As I wrestled with my fear, I realized I was finally hearing His words not with my head, but with my heart. Nothing in my head could have explained my fear. But the deepest parts of my heart knew the truth. I was protecting my heart. I was scared to have it broken. I had been scared all my life.

“Daughter, start with this: I want you to dance for Me. As you dance, you will learn My ways. You will begin to know, with all that you are, the depths of My love. You will begin to know the depths of Who I Am.”

The fear was oppressive. But His promise was infinitely greater. More powerful by far. A promise that He would love me forever, and teach me His ways, and dance with me, and never let go of me. A promise too good to be true. *Yet He is Truth.* And for the first time, I knew how desperately I wanted His love to consume me, His heart to set me on fire... *Forever.*

I let Him break my heart that day. It was just the beginning of the work He would do in me over the next year, and the work He will do in my heart for eternity, as He continues to overflow my heart with His love for His people. It was an awesome beginning.

I thought about the people I'd prayed for. In my flesh, I was heartbroken for them already, as I looked at what they faced. He wanted more than that. He wanted me to look with a new heart, to let His new heart in me break for them. And then to see the blessings, the glory, to feel the eternal love He has for each one of them. To believe it for them! To understand that through the faith we shared, we would see Him do a mighty work in their lives, in their churches, in the community and nation – beyond anything a broken human heart could imagine.

Letting God begin to open my heart... it was frightening to let myself become that vulnerable. I wasn't afraid to be vulnerable to God. I was afraid of the world. That's when God reminded me: "Trust in Me, Daughter. Be vulnerable to Me. I will protect you in the world. I will protect your heart."

We spent a lot of time talking that day, Abba and I. He wanted me to let go of my heart completely. Let go of my fears, my self-protection. Get swept up in the River of His Spirit, His power, His love. I needed to allow Him to overflow my life completely, in every way. That would be just the beginning. He showed me He wanted more still. Not just to let the River carry me. He wanted me to *dance* in the River. To risk my new heart with Him again and again.

"You're My precious daughter. You're a daughter of the King. Can you see that? My plans for you are not what you've allowed yourself to believe. Do you understand how much I love you?"

He repeated those words to me for the rest of the day, and for days to come. My eyes filled with tears every time He spoke to me that way: tears of repentance for giving up my deep trust in His love, years ago; for letting the world get in the way and dictate my expectations; tears of gratitude that He had brought me out of such a dark place and into His light; tears of love... the beginnings of joy.

My spirit was on fire with an intensity I'd never dreamed of.

I felt Him brush His fingertips across my forehead, and I shivered deep inside. Was this what true love felt like? I wanted to hold onto that love forever. Suddenly it was easy to die to myself, completely, in the midst of His overpowering love. Then take hold of His love and trust Him to live in me completely; trust Him to protect my heart; and to let His love reach through my heart to everyone around me.

In that moment, I knew He had me. He had a hold of my heart, and the River of His love would carry me. But could I really dance in the River? Could I really dance in His love?

And would His heart really dance through me?

At the church we visited that night, Edna's CD was swallowed by a machine that refused to spit it out. She wasn't able to dance that night. My heart ached – I missed it! That's when I knew for sure I would answer His call to dance. With all of my heart. With His heart overflowing in me. I knew that together, by the power of His love, my beautiful and perfect Lord Jesus and I would dance in the River.

You are my everything, and I will adore You.

I knew I would gladly risk my new heart for Him again and again... forever.

It wasn't really a risk. He is eternal Love.

Though the praise and worship were lively that night, it seemed nothing much was happening. The Holy Spirit spark wasn't there. Oh, it wasn't like the oppressed church we'd prayed in – no dark spirits, no oppression. No willful resistance, as we sometimes encountered with people. Nothing you could put your finger on that said, "Holy Spirit not welcome here."

And yet they weren't letting Him in. They seemed distracted – thoughts and hearts scattered, hostage to a spirit of confusion. They didn't seem ready to be in His presence, much less believe He could change their lives that night.

That's when Rick started the comedy routine. And suddenly, I felt a shift in the Spirit.

It was Rick's usual message, which always had its humorous moments. And you have to know Rick to visualize his antics. He always makes the point. But this night, he went all out. In the midst of hysterical laughter, the congregation went from distracted... to focused... *to totally engaged*. It just clicked, and the Spirit moved in. They were crying from laughter, practically rolling out of their seats. But at last, they were aware of God's presence and flipping open their Bibles, aware perhaps for the first time that they were starving for His Word.

Right in the middle of the comedy routine, Rick called us to go into the congregation, lay hands and pray. It was almost surreal, praying for someone while they were shaking with laughter. Yet the Spirit flowed. God knew how to reach this crowd, and Rick responded to His direction. When the key to unlocking the Word is laughter... roll with it!

I had prayed for so many people on the trip that I couldn't remember all the prayers. In my mind, I could see a swirl of faces, but I couldn't tell you what I had prayed for. It wasn't mine to know. If you're an intercessor, you know the feeling. Sometimes the Holy Spirit moves into situations through your prayers, and you don't know who, when or what. *He knows*. That's what matters. You just have to stay open to Him and let Him do His thing.

Of course, it's one thing praying for an unknown person on the other side of the world. You know God has you praying for a reason, to intercede in a situation He's working in. It's tougher when you're laying hands on someone. It's not an unknown burden God puts on your heart. You know; you're there, and it's tough not to stay with the person. Human emotion gets in the way.

I remember thinking I'd need to have my hands surgically removed from a woman's shoulders in church that night. I had finished praying; I knew God had done His thing, and I felt no continuing burden to pray. But her situation was so much like mine. How did I know? The Spirit showed me. Did she know how much He loved her? Did she know that when I let go of her, God would still be with her? That she should keep going to Him in prayer, trusting Him, asking others in her church to pray with her? Asking God to call intercessors on the other side of the world to pray for her too?

I couldn't tell her any of these things. I couldn't say anything to make her visible pain go away. But I saw the peace beginning to settle behind her tears. I knew she had felt God's love that night. I had to trust Him with her future.

When you feel compassion, it's hard to accept that you can't make things right for someone. Only God can do that. What if I did speak Portuguese? What if I could have spent five hours, even five days with her? Could I have changed her situation? No.

God had a plan for her; my prayer that night and her acceptance of it was one tiny part. If He had given me a burden to keep praying for her, I would have. He didn't. His plan in her situation didn't include me beyond that moment. That was tough to accept, but I trusted Him. I let go and gave her back into His care. I moved on to pray for the next person He brought to me.

Jesus had compassion – even many who didn't believe He was the Son of God wouldn't question that. But because He is the Son of God, He trusted His Father beyond human emotion. He felt emotion, but He let the Holy Spirit guide His actions and prayers. He knew God had a bigger, better plan that went beyond momentary needs. God's plan was about Salvation and His eternal love.

The woman I prayed for that night – I let her go; but Jesus didn't. I trust that He who started a good work in her will see it through to completion.¹³ And because of the work He's doing in her church, she will have nurturing and guidance to keep trusting the work He is doing in her.

The trip was nearing the end, but God wasn't through with the lessons or the blessings. At a time when we had almost no money left to give as an offering, God was ready to help us give more.

I've talked with so many people whose finances turned around when they started tithing. I'm one of those people. The more you trust God to provide, the more He will provide.

¹³ Philippians 1:6

God showed His provision through the money He raised to support each member of the mission team. And we arrived in Brazil with a team love offering that was enough to buy chicken and medicine, pay for immediate operational expenses, buy a few musical instruments... even cover the truck repair costs.

Faith in God's provision was an important part of the message at each church we visited. It wasn't just about the offerings we gave to each church. It was more important to encourage the congregation to give to their church, regardless of how little they had – so they would understand God would reward their trust and multiply their gifts.

Often we would put money in the hands of those who had none. Coins or very small bills, so they could walk up and deposit it in the offering container; so they would understand God would take that coin or bill and use it to build His Kingdom and bless them in turn.

At one of the last churches we visited on the trip, God was faithful to demonstrate this. The church building was under construction. We were told it had started as a tent with outdoor toilets. Now the toilets were indoors and the sanctuary had a roof. They still had a long way to go, and the congregation was growing. As the pastor prayed before the offering, he stepped out in faith and said he had asked God to provide enough money for the concrete they needed, and God said He would provide it... tonight.

As we handed over our last coins to the congregation to deposit in the offering, we searched our bags for any money we might contribute toward the purchase of the concrete. At every church, we had felt the Holy Spirit leading us to give more than we thought we could. Here at the end, we were dredging the bottom. We had almost nothing left, and yet we knew God intended to provide the concrete – and we knew He meant it to happen this night.

I can't explain where the money came from – including the extra \$20 I found in my wallet that morning, when I knew it hadn't been there before. All I know is that God provided. The pastor counted out the money that had been gathered and held it up for the congregation to see. It was more than enough to buy the concrete. The congregation cheered, and with a grin I said, "Go God!"

I tried to give my own financial contribution the next day. I'd been expecting a check to be deposited back home. I had waited for it to clear, because I wanted to give some cash to the mission. When I confirmed online that the money was available, I told Rick. He asked Tony to drive me to an ATM in downtown Rio. Lynn went with me. It was a long trip, but I was determined.

I'll never forget when we pulled up to a stoplight and looked out the car window at a street vendor. I used to live in New York City, so I was used to seeing people selling things in the street. But this made me laugh. The man was carrying a giant box, selling every flavor of Halls lozenges. I wished I had my camera.

"No one will ever believe this."

"Oh, come on," Lynn said. "You've got two witnesses, including a pastor! They'll have to believe it."

We got to the bank that had the ATMs. Unfortunately, I couldn't get a single machine to work. The call was not going through to my bank at home. I prayed. I asked to speak to a bank officer. I did everything but rip the machine out of the wall. No money.

I was disappointed as we returned to the mission empty-handed. Disappointment changed to rejoicing as we pulled up in front of the mission just in time to see our two Holy Spirit mechanics drive up in the newly repaired truck! Praise God! *Hallelujah!*

At the airport the next day, I would try again to make a financial contribution to the mission. This time, Rick intervened and stopped me.

"No," he said. "You'll need your money."

I had no idea what he was talking about. I had already planned to donate to the mission; I just wasn't having much success.

He shook his head. "You'll need it."

I assumed He'd gotten that from God, but I sure wasn't getting it. I wanted the mission to have that money. What did I need the extra money for?

I had no idea that within two weeks of my return to the States, God Himself was going to buy me a new car, so I could take my new ministry – His ministry – on the road.

Edna's CD was never recovered from the machine that ate it. I truly believe God made that happen. He wanted a new song. We had all started to feel that the first song was so anointed. I believe He wanted to remind us that the anointing comes from Him – in the moment, and for the moment. We had to keep trusting Him for His direction and anointing in worship. That meant choosing a new song for the last church we visited.

We had a bit of a drive on the bus, so Edna brought her CD player and sat listening. Several of us were praying for her. Finally she found the track she believed God wanted, and she let me listen. I had never heard the song before but it took my breath away. It was CeCe Winans' *Alabaster Box*.

Edna had never danced to that song, so she asked us to start praying and to keep praying all through the dance. On the bus, the Holy Spirit was giving her a vision of using her bottle of anointing oil during the dance, maybe pouring it into a dish. As she danced at the church, He showed her something better. She poured the oil across the giant wooden cross that stood behind the altar. The moment she did that, the congregation broke into pieces and the Holy Spirit took over. As people came up for the altar call, we brushed our fingers along the cross and used the oil for prayer.

Six months later, on the other side of the world, I would be dancing to the same song in a worship service at a Spirit-filled church in Arkansas, where God would take my ministry... and where a year later He would send me as a full-time missionary. During that dance, I was consumed by the blazing fire of the Holy Spirit. Completely undone by the passion of my Lord Jesus – His passion for me, for everyone around me, *for every precious soul He's ever created*. His heart poured through mine – His love was the power that moved me. And I finally understood, *with all of my heart*, what it means to dance in the River.

At our last church service in Brazil, God took over me completely. Once a self-assured world traveler and spiritual warrior, whose heart was recently broken wide open by the love of God – I was completely lost for words in that worship service. And for once, I didn't need to know what I was praying.

I knew God's Spirit was present within me, and He was not going to let go. For the first time in my life, I wasn't concerned with how I prayed, or what I prayed, or how I felt. I wasn't there to be tough or to fight. I was utterly broken by God's love, and that's all I wanted for everyone in that place. My prayer was simple. I wanted them to feel His presence in their hearts.

God's love is so amazing that we could spend eternity in exploration and never know the depths of it. The most intense moments of love we feel for Him and for others are a drop in the ocean of His eternal love. To explore the love of God is a never-ending journey into His very heart.

It's a journey I don't ever want to quit. I am learning to see His love everywhere, in incredible ways, and His Holy Spirit is teaching me new ways to share it. His compassion is beyond anything I can imagine, and my compassion for others no longer comes from my own emotions; it's starting to come from Him instead, and I don't want anything less.

God can do whatever He wants with my heart. It's all His. I trust Him completely. I trust His protection of my heart in the world. I'm a warrior when He asks, but no longer out of self-protection. It's out of love. *His love*. The love of Jesus, my precious Lord and Savior – the one true love of my life from childhood, from youth.

I went halfway around the world to fall in love with Him again. And to discover His true love for me. Because He's opened my heart to receive His love, I can truly allow Him to love others through me. His way. With His love.

You are my everything, and I will adore You.

Every time I dance in the River, Jesus is there – His heart on fire, His hand stretched out to me. I know He will always be.

These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full. This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you. You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you. These things I command you, that you love one another.¹⁴

¹⁴ John 15:11-17 NKJV

Post Script: Somewhere in the River

The final edit of this e-book was a challenge. I had to blend several voices, because I'm not the same person I was a year ago – or even an hour ago. I wrote sections of this book in March 2007, right after my two-week fast that followed the Brazil trip. I wrote most of the narrative during another time of fasting in August 2007, while I was visiting friends in Arkansas. I had a broken finger, so my friend Janie typed as I sat on the floor, closed my eyes and talked from my heart and spirit. It seemed God was changing me, growing me every hour, and my voice changed throughout the narrative.

All of that was before Elijah House, a six-month prayer ministry training program where God sliced me wide open, scraped out my insides, took over my heart (I thought He already had!), shook off the dust and the noise, and breathed new life into me. (You can read my Elijah House testimony at <http://www.janeteriksson.com/elijahhouse.html>) Near the end of Elijah House, I added further reflections to this e-book and did some editing. Again, I was a different person, with a different voice. Since then, God has taken me on more incredible journeys of transformation and restoration, and led me into new areas of ministry. I LOVE the life He has given me!

As I've told Rick Bonfim many times, "It all started in Brazil." Actually, it all started much earlier than that... before the foundation of the world. It started with God's love. His love is a precious gift that has not changed and will never change. It is my one constant in life, the current that keeps me dancing in the River. *Abba, Lord Jesus, Holy Spirit... I love You!*

About the author

My name is Janet Eriksson. I'm one of God's kids, just like you. My heart belongs to Jesus. At 42 years old, I'm blessed with a brand new life that the Lord has given me. I'm involved in ministry to teens and to single women; prayer and healing ministry; and I'm working toward becoming a pastoral counselor through the United Methodist Church. I'm privileged to be working at [Eagle Ranch](#), a group home for teens in north Georgia; I'm a parapro at the Eagle Ranch School, and I work with the students in the writing lab. I am "wild and crazy," a kid at heart. I also love to spend quiet time with God, praying and writing what He inspires. I have a wonderful church family at [Dahlonega United Methodist Church](#), a Spirit-filled place of worship, fellowship, missions and outreach in north Georgia. At Dahlonega UMC, I'm active in intercessory prayer, [Elijah House](#), teaching youth Sunday School, community groups, and worship dance. I enjoy going on short-term mission trips. I'm also active in the [Georgia Foothills Walk to Emmaus](#) community and [Georgia Mountain Tres Dias](#). I enjoy coloring books and crafts and making prayer bracelets. I'd love to hear from you at jlynn.erik@gmail.com!